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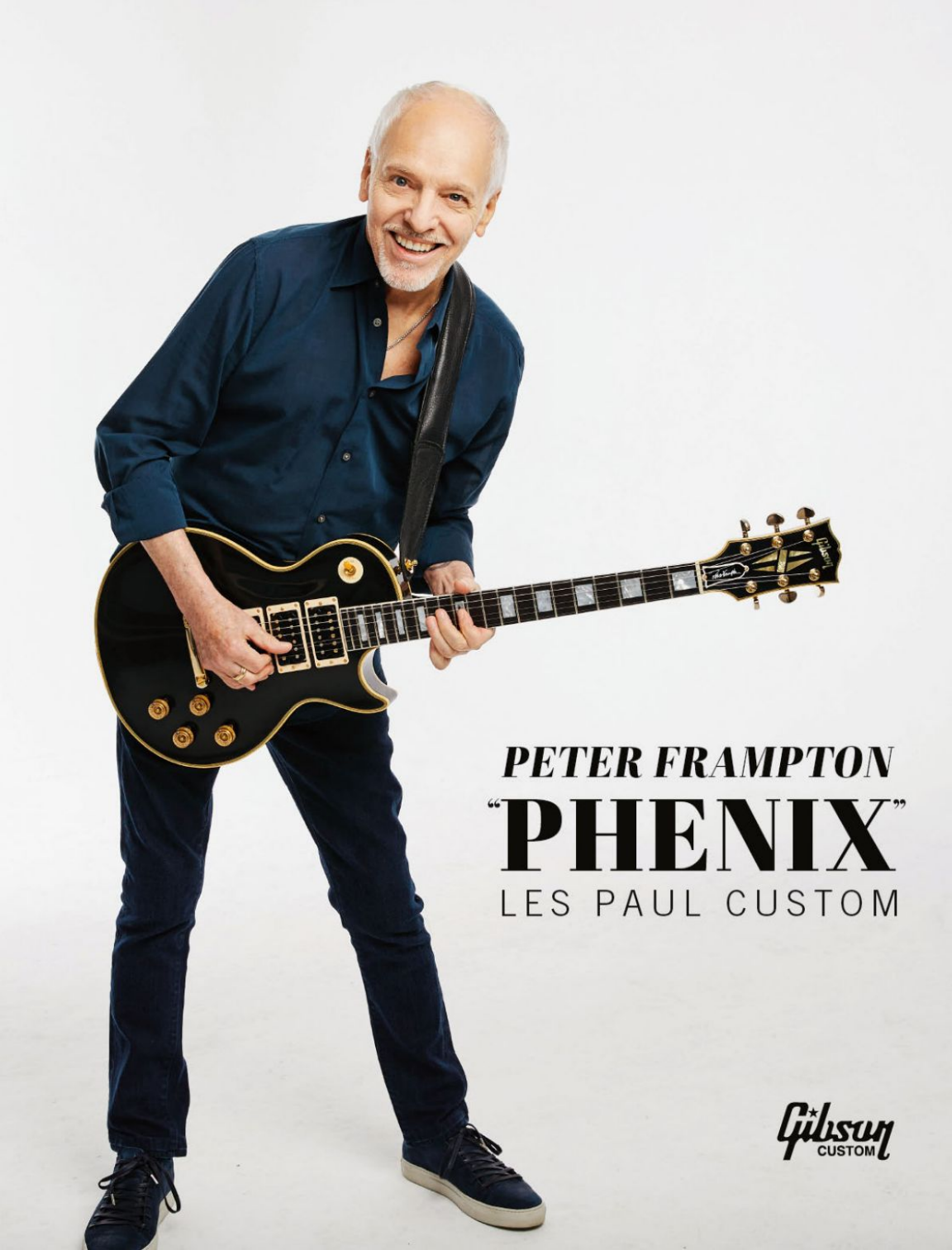
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{From the Editor}

Fresh Prince

IT'S NOT UNUSUAL for musicians to keep an element of what they do secret. Some do it to prevent others from learning their processes, defy convention or create an air of mystery. Still others are just irritatingly private and have no interest in sharing anything beyond the music they make.

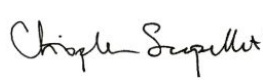
And then there's Prince, to whom all of these explanations would apply. He was the defiant artist who rebelled against the recording industry's control in the name of artistic freedom. He even changed his name to an unpronounceable glyph and kept hundreds of unreleased songs — the results of countless hours spent in his recording studio — locked away in a vault.

Guitar Player senior editor Art Thompson experienced the enigma of Prince on two occasions, when he interviewed him for the magazine's January 2000 and July 2004 cover stories at the artist's Paisley Park studio in Minnesota. "Tape recorders weren't allowed," Art recalls. "I'd ask him a question and have to write down his answer as he gave it. When *Keyboard* associate editor Ernie Rideout and I were preparing to interview him separately, he had agreed to allow a court stenographer to transcribe our conversations on a steno machine. That lasted about five minutes. He couldn't stand it."

Prince's death five years ago unleashed the expected flood of revelations and rumors, but what interested us, of course, were his music and methods. Reaching out to some of his associates for this issue's tribute on the fifth anniversary of his death, we found them more open to sharing stories about working with Prince than they were when he was alive. He was so private that, in his time, many found it best to say nothing at all.

For this month's cover story, Art spoke with several of Prince's longtime guitarists and associates. Mike Scott toured for years with him and shares stories about how Prince worked with musicians, his demanding performance expectations and his gear choices. Dez Dickerson, Prince's original guitar foil, provides insights into his evolution as a musician over his first albums and how he developed his ideas, while Kat Dyson, who played guitar in his band New Power Generation, speaks about the constant recording that went on at Paisley Park and Prince's obsession with her Godin Multiac. Likewise, Donna Grantis, who played guitar in 3rdEyeGirl, Prince's backing band from 2014 to his death in 2016, provides revealing insights into working with him, while Paisley Park engineer Hans-Martin Buff shares a portrait of a musician who could quickly work up a song into a finished recording, as if it arrived in his head fully formed. And it probably did. What emerges is a clearer picture of the mystery that was Prince, a genius whose music and methods continue to beguile us.

Speaking of secrets, we've always been curious to know what guitarists play when they're woodshedding, writing songs or making demos. As we wait for touring to begin again, it seemed the perfect time to ask a handful of players to reveal what's in their home rigs. In this issue's special gear section, John Petrucci, Sonny Landreth, Marty Friedman, Paul Gilbert, Alex Skolnick, Richie Kotzen, Myles Kennedy and Ron "Bumblefoot" Thal share photos of their home rigs, along with insights into how they use them. I extend my thanks to all for taking the time to help us. I think you'll love it, and you can expect to find more in future issues.



Guitar Player

Vol. 55 No. 7 JULY 2021

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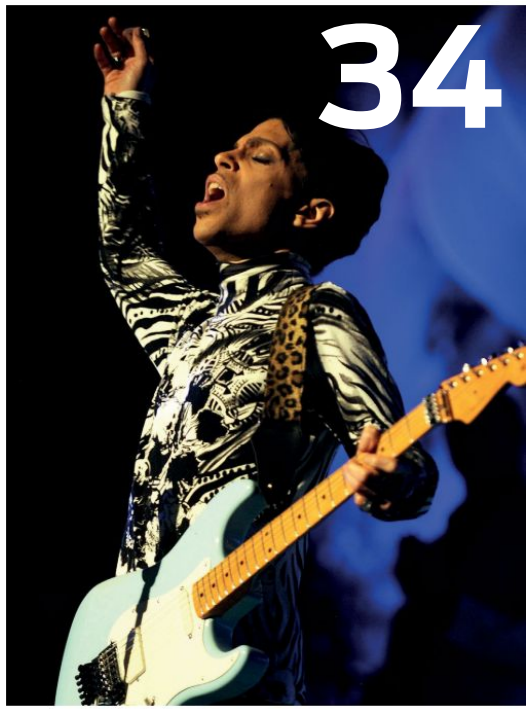
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ON THE COVER
Prince at the Forum in Inglewood, California, April 14, 2011
Kevin Mazur/WireImage/Getty Images

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Guitar Player (ISSN 0017-5463) is published monthly with an extra issue in December by Future, 11 West 42nd St., 15th Floor, New York, NY 10036. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post: Publications Mail Agreement #40612608. Canada Returns to be sent to Bleuchip International, P.O. Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Guitar Player, P.O. Box 2029, Langhorne, PA 19047-9957.



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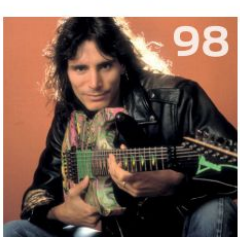
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May Showers

Thanks for the gracious nod to Brian May, one of the finest and most gentlemanly guitarists to grace rock and roll for perhaps ever [*May 2021*]. The interview was entertaining and informative. I had no idea Queen had toured with Mott the Hoople — of all bands! But what I found most enlightening was the article on "10 Queen Songs You Never Hear on the Radio — But Should." I would add "Long Away," from *A Day at the Races*. Brian not only wrote it but sings it too. It's catchy and sweet and should have been a hit. Brian himself said it's one of the songs he'd like to be remembered for, and for good reason. It's a hidden gem! —STEPHEN SPECKLER

I have been reading stories about Brian May in your magazine and others for 30 years, and almost every time a mention is given about some guy in Texas that he saw doing finger tapping. No credit has ever been given to the "guy." I am almost certain the person May is referring to is a guitar slinger in the San Antonio/Austin area named Van Wilks. He has been doing his feats of double-finger tapping since the early '70s. His guitar skills are off the chart and his songwriting is way up there too. He's good friends with everyone from Billy Gibbons to Eric Johnson and known in this area to be one of the best. Just wanted to give a shout out and credit where credit is due. Thanks and keep up the good work.
—STEVE MULLINS

Was it just a coincidence that Brian was on the cover of your May issue? —BOB FELICIA

V For Vic

So wonderful to see Vic Flick given honors in *Guitar Player*. He may not be in Queen, but he is guitar royalty. Who else played for James Bond and the Beatles, not to mention with Jimmy Page and Eric Clapton? Martin McQuade's interview with him was a huge treat that made an already fantastic issue even better. It's great to see these early titans of the electric guitar alive and kicking and in my favorite guitar magazine. —PAUL DELONG

That Lovin' Feeling

Thanks so much for the John Sebastian interview! Always loved the Lovin' Spoonful's music. A few years ago, I found out John was the harmonica player, uncredited, on the Doors song, "Roadhouse Blues." I found his Facebook page and asked a question about the song. John not only answered my message but sent me another the next day with additional info he had remembered. Hell of a nice guy! — BEN FOWLER

I can't tell you what a delight it was to see John Sebastian in your pages and in the one section I would want to see him in: My Career in Five Songs. I look forward to this article every issue, pretty much regardless of who's in it, since I always know a few of the songs and enjoy learning something about what went down at the sessions. But man — John Sebastian is one of my boyhood heroes. I grew up on the 1960s streets of New York's West Village when the Lovin' Spoonful were topping the charts, and I swam in oceans of fire hydrant water during the summer that "Summer in the City" was blasting out of radios. John is a national treasure, as are his songs. Thanks for making my month!
—SAL MATHIS

Swede Emotion

It thrilled me no end to see Yngwie Malmsteen in your May issue talking about how he wrote "Far Beyond the Sun." He's the reason I started playing, and "Far Beyond the Sun" is the song that did it. All hail the greatest of them all! —BOBBY AHERN

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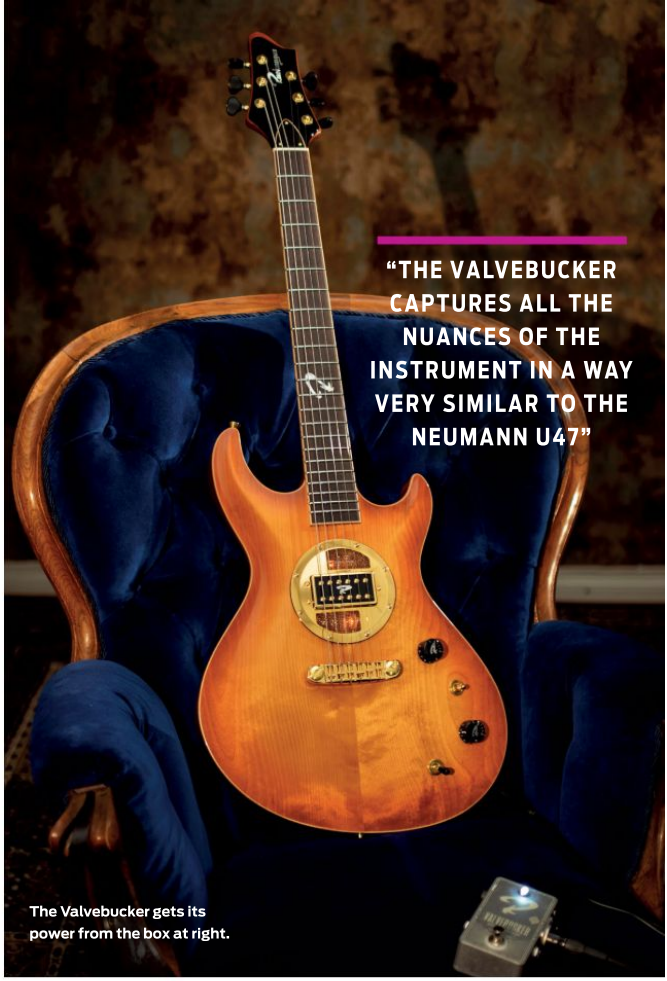
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AUDIOPHILE AXE

With its tube-powered pickup, the Ruokangas Duke Valvebucker is a high-fidelity experience.

BY ART THOMPSON



The Valvebucker gets its power from the box at right.

FOUNDED IN 1995 by guitar maker Juha Ruokangas, the Finland-based company that bears his name handcrafts astonishing instruments that are built by a small team of highly skilled people. There are seven basic models in the Ruokangas line, which includes the Duke Classic (the Duke series also features the Artisan and Supersonic models), spotlighted here as equipped with the optional tube-powered Valvebucker pickup. I was initially turned on to the Valvebucker by Sonny Landreth, who said the sound of this unique pickup that he experienced on a Ruokangas Mojo guitar had such uncanny transparency and note detail that it sounded like it was running through a vintage Neve console pre and EQ.

Intrigued by Sonny's comments, and with his assistance, we eventually obtained a review sample from Ruokangas. Removed from its cream-colored case, the lightweight solidbody was a visual knockout, with a shapely offset-cutaway body made of Spanish cedar and capped with a carved top of thermally aged (or roasted) Arctic birch finished in a lovely amber Honeyburst shade. "I find birch to be a perfect match with Spanish cedar, so I've stuck with that combo for nearly 25 years now," Ruokangas says. "The tone of birch is not too far from maple, but it has its own kind of low-mid shine, and, aesthetically, birch trees have way more variety than maple. They can be rather plain looking, but it can be anything — wildly flamed, curled, burled or quilted. I have collected birch for over 20 years, and as most of our guitars are custom made, the buyer gets to hand-pick the top."

Ruokangas reports that he discovered Spanish cedar in the early '90s while apprenticing for a master luthier who specialized in classical guitars. "Even though Spanish cedar is the most common neck material in hand-made classical guitars, and more desirable than mahogany because of its light weight and superb stability, I found that nobody was really using it for electric guitars. A Finnish colleague of mine had made one and said it sounded great but was impossible to sell. In any case, I held on to the idea that maybe Spanish cedar could become my thing. Eventually a lot of younger-generation luthiers began using it, but at the time I was more or less alone with it."

The glued-in neck has a very comfortable and inviting shape that is based on a late-'50s Les Paul — specifically a '57 goldtop and a '59 'burst that are owned by a collector in Finland — and the East Indian rosewood fretboard has a 12-inch scale and carries 22 finely crowned and polished stainless-steel jumbo frets. The strings ride over a smooth, polished nut made of unbleached moose shinbone.

The Elixir Nanoweb .010–.046 strings are pulled to pitch by a set of Gotoh SGL510 locking tuners, and they load into a German-made ABM 3024 wraparound aluminum bridge that features unique locking studs. "The locking studs are made by Jason Schroeder in the U.S.A.," Ruokangas says. "If you turn the guitar around, you'll notice that the bridge is anchored through the body with what we call lock-thru-body bushings. That part is our own invention and a solution to the old problem of wraparound bridges

sometimes starting to lean forward over time due to the constant tension of the strings. That can never happen with these locking bushings. So it looks like one rock-solid bridge, but it is in fact a combination of three makers: one in Germany, one in the U.S. and the third in Finland."

The Duke played beautifully out of the box, thanks to an excellent factory setup that remained stable on the trip from Finland to Northern California, and the intonation was tuneful in all positions. These factors all contributed to a vibrant acoustic sound and good sustain. The most obvious thing on the guitar is, of course, the large circular pickup mount, which has screened openings to vent the heat from the two tubes. Both are undisclosed NOS military-spec types from the 1950s (one triode and one pentode), and the voltage is raised in the guitar for proper operation. The pickup itself is a humbucker made in Germany by Harry Haüssel, which is designed to work with the active electronics. So what's going on here that warrants the complication of installing what is basically a high-end tube-preamp in a guitar?

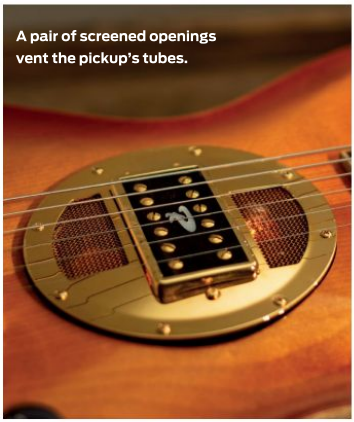
"If you think of all the traditional electric guitars and guitar sounds we love, most of it originates to technology based in the 1940s and '50s," Ruokangas says. "It's all passive magnetic pickups, and it's all pretty lo-fi. However, studio technology developed in a completely different direction at the same time. Neumann came up with their U47 microphone in the late '40s, and this legendary tube mic was able to capture sound in such a musically pleasing way that literally everybody started using it. The U47 was able to catch all the nuances of sound faithfully, be it the human voice, horns or any acoustic instrument.

"So in a nutshell, the Valvebucker is an active electric guitar pickup that captures the instrument's nuances in a way similar to how the U47 works. We added a second gain stage for sculpting the tone further — hence, the second tube — and that's what the three-way lever switch does. The neck position is the Valvebucker in its natural form, and the other two positions represent two different examples of filtering/sculpting the sound back into more familiar electric-guitar realms."

I had a chance to play out on the day the Duke Valvebucker arrived, so I brought it along. The 12-volt AC wall-wart power supply connects to a separate box that uses an XLR cable to interface with the guitar; a 1/4-inch jack on the box then feeds your amplifier via a standard guitar cable. Driving into a Fender Deluxe Reverb, the Duke delivered clear, richly expressive and extremely open sounds that took well to pedals and didn't demand undue use of the tone controls on the guitar or the amp. The three-way selector provides a nice range of tones, from beefy humbucker textures to slimmer, snappier sounds that are similar to what you'd get from a Tele or a Strat. There is also a 6dB boost switch that is handy for kicking up the level for solos.

This guitar felt familiar enough to use it on a gig on short notice, and yet, with more time to plumb its depth, I found that there is definitely a degree of detail and articulation and harmonically pleasing "juiciness" in the sound that makes this instrument its own animal — at least from the perspective of most solidbody electrics. Bottom line: The Duke Valvebucker definitely opens up new sonic territory that players who love hi-fi sounds will want to explore, and this alone makes it worthy of investigation for anyone who thinks they've heard it all and can appreciate the possibilities that lurk in the melding of two very different audio technologies from the past.





A pair of screened openings vent the pickup's tubes.





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GUIDED BY VOICINGS

Jane Getter's singular sense of scales lends mystery to the fusiony *Anomalia*.

BY VINNIE DEMASI



Jane Getter in New York City with her custom Peekamoose electric

THE GREAT PERSIAN philosopher Rumi once spoke of a metaphorical field beyond notions of right and wrong where the soul would be fulfilled beyond words. If such a place had a soundtrack, it could very well be *Anomalia* (Cherry Red Records), the imaginative new album by Jane Getter Premonition. *Anomalia* is a phantasmagoric trip that twists and turns between King Crimson–esque *sturm und drang*, heavy funk, psychedelic blues, lyrical anti-folk and melodic pop rock. At its center are Getter's formidable talents as a guitarist, composer and vocalist. Joining her for the ride are keyboardist Adam Holzman, second guitarist Alex Skolnick, bassists Stu Hamm and Mark Egan, and drummers Chad Wackerman and Gene Lane.

What were the challenges of making an album during a global pandemic?

I essentially work with two rhythm sections — the West Coast one of Stu Hamm and Chad Wackerman, and the East Coast one of Mark Egan and Gene Lane. Thankfully we'd finished all the basic tracks with sessions on both coasts just before the pandemic shut everything down. The overdubs and guest appearances by guitarist Vernon Reid and vocalists Chanda Rule and Randy McStine were going to be recorded remotely anyway. The mixing by Junichi Murakawa and mastering by Andy VanDette was also done remotely, so it was fortuitous that we were able to get the live tracks down when we did.

"MOST OF THE CHORD SHAPES ARE BASED ON ME JUST MESSING AROUND UNTIL I HIT UPON SOMETHING THAT SOUNDS COOL"

What was your main rig on *Anomalia*?

I mostly used my Peekamoose guitar that was custom-made by Paul Schwartz. It's a Strat shape with humbucker pickups that have a coil-split option, a rounded neck and medium-sized frets. I also used a '71 Fender Telecaster on a few things. I used a '70s Martin D-28 for all the acoustic parts except for the solo acoustic tune "Safe House." That was tracked on a mid-'80s Ovation nylon-string I have, although I'm not sure of the model. My main amp is a Fuchs Full House 50, which is where I get my distortion sound. I used a Vox wah and a Diamond Vibrato pedal, but all the reverb and delay came from plug-ins.

The nine tracks on *Anomalia* are a mix of vocal tunes and instrumental tunes. Do you tend to write the music first and add vocals later?

I'm a guitar player first and foremost, so the music comes first. As I'm playing around with a riff or a chord progression, I'll know straight away what kind of melody I hear with it and whether I hear it as a vocal song or an instrumental song. Once I decide what songs I'm going to sing on, I'll go and come up with the words. I wrote all the lyrics on the album, except "Disappear," which was adapted from a poem by my friend Beth Muller.

"Alien Refugee," "Answers" and "Queen of Spies" start with acoustic guitar before blossoming into full-band arrangements. Were they written on acoustic?
Actually, I pretty much wrote everything on electric, then decided certain things would work better on the acoustic as we were putting the arrangements together.

Do you ever use any open tunings?
No, not really. Maybe drop-D on occasion, but open and altered tunings are something I never really explored.

You do seem to employ a lot of unusual chord voicings though, like at the beginning of "Dissembler" for instance.
The beginning is just me and Alex playing similar chords. Then the keyboards come in a little later. Sometimes when I translate guitar chords onto the written keyboard chart, I'll make them slightly different to create a more layered sound. To be honest though, most of the chord shapes I play are based on me just messing around until I hit upon something that sounds cool. I'm guided more by my ear than by any theoretical formula. I'll also create my own scales based on note groupings that I think sound good together.

Can you give an example?
Sure. A few years ago, I spent two months in India and a friend showed me a certain raga that I really liked, but I didn't think I would be able to translate it into the world of Western music. My solution was to take some notes out that didn't work, then add some I thought would work. Eventually I came up with a six-note scale voiced 1 - ♭2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - ♭7, christened the Chennai scale after the city in India. You can hear it on "Kryptone" starting at around 1:12, when I'm trading lines with Adam in the key of E. This would make the pitches of the scale E, F, G♯, A, B and D.

In regard to the scales I create, I am aware that some may already exist with a different name. I'm still not aware which of my scales exist theoretically elsewhere, but it's not important to me to find out. What does matter is the process I went through to create them, and there are a lot of ways you can do this. For example, sometimes I'll take a traditional scale and just add a dissonant note to it; sometimes I'll take a traditional scale and simply leave notes out to give it a more open sound; and then sometimes I'll pick two triads and weave their notes together to create a new scale. I actually have a course online at Truefire.com where I go into detail about all the different scales I use and how I create them.

You definitely do your share of shredding on *Anomalia*, but you also turn the center-stage spotlight over Alex Skolnick and Vernon Reid in places too.
Alex plays rhythm on many tracks. He also takes the main solo toward the end of "Kryptone" and some of the distorted lines in the verse of "Dissembler," and we trade solos in "Still Here." When I perform live, Alex and I will play a lot of layered parts, playing in different octaves and that sort of thing. He'll sometimes hold down the rhythm when I'm singing. Vernon is a guest soloist on "Dissembler," and his playing is just so unique. It was a great element to add.

What instrument is playing the initial melody on "Queen of Spies"?
That's Adam on one of his vintage Moogs. Then the guitar comes in and we play it together.

"Queen of Spies" reminds me a little bit of the middle section of Metallica's "Master of Puppets," and "Still Here" seems like it nods to the Mahavishnu Orchestra's "Meeting of the Spirits" a bit. Were these direct inspirations at all?
These weren't deliberate nods, but certainly those artists are on my radar, especially John McLaughlin. I'd say that, on this album, I was also really influenced by Porcupine Tree, Allan Holdsworth and Jeff Beck, among others. The switching from loud riffy sections to softer picking things probably comes from King Crimson, and the more metal riff–type things were inspired by bands like Opeth and Animals as Leaders.



RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Anomalia
"Kryptone," "Lessons Learned," "Queen of Spies," "Still Here," "Safe House"



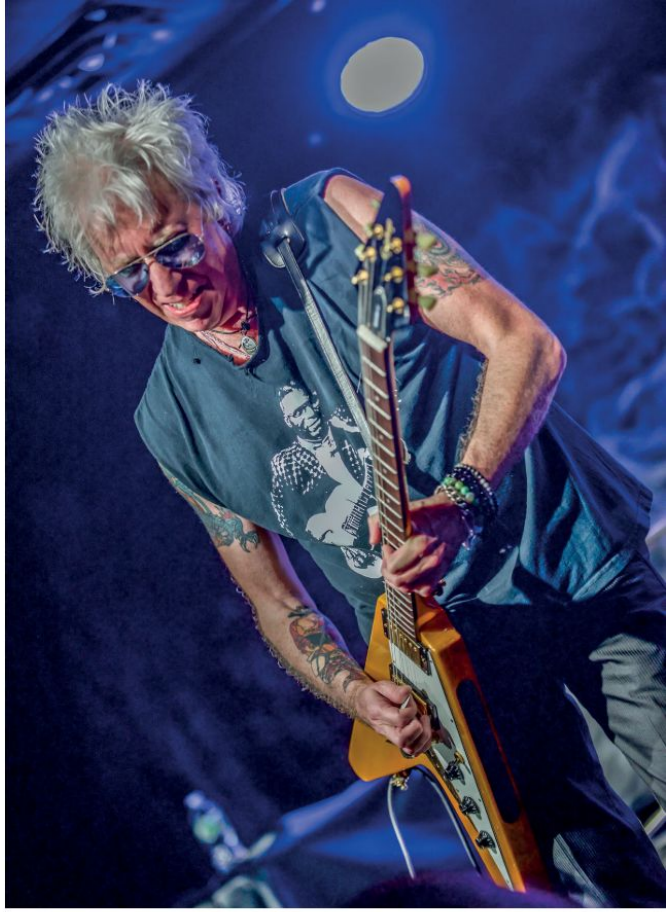
Your influences seem rather wide-ranging though. "Lessons Learned" is kind of a dark song that has something of a pop hook with bright layered vocal harmonies for the chorus.
That's actually the single the label is promoting, so I guess they think so too!

How will you work around not being able to go out on the road to support the new album?
Well, until concerts come back fully, we're all just doing the best we can. I'm going to be hosting some Facebook live events, and I've already done a few livestreams. It is pretty surreal playing and not having audience feedback though. Suffice to say, I can't wait to play in front of a live audience again.

STRONG STUFF

On *Sobering Times*, Ricky Byrd writes a soundtrack to recovery's redemption.

BY JOE BOSSO



JEFF SMITH

IN ADDITION TO his two-decade run as a member of Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, Ricky Byrd has played guitar alongside a list of music legends that includes Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello, Ringo Starr, Alice Cooper, Ian Hunter, Smokey Robinson and Mavis Staples. When asked if he's got a cool rock-and-roll story, he comes up with a beauty.

"I was playing a benefit at Carnegie Hall with Roger Daltrey," he begins. "At the soundcheck, I said, 'Rog, you're going to swing the mic, right?' He said, 'Do you think I should?' And I go, 'I've been waiting for this moment for 20 years, man. Swing that mic!'

"So we're doing the show, and during 'Behind Blue Eyes,' we get to the middle section and I hear this whizzing sound. I turned and the mic missed my head by two inches. I saw Roger looking at me, and he's got this big grin on his face." He laughs. "I've got a million of those stories. I'm truly blessed, man."

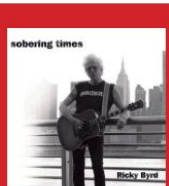
Byrd feels blessed for other, more significant reasons. Now celebrating his 33rd year of sobriety, the Rock and Roll Hall of Famer (he was inducted with Joan Jett and the Blackhearts in 2015) works as a drug and alcohol counselor, visiting schools and detox centers to perform and lead recovery music groups. Since leaving the Blackhearts in 1991, he's released a number of solo albums, including 2015's *Clean Getaway*, on which he detailed his journey through sobriety.

His newest solo disc, *Sobering Times* (Kayos Records), continues that narrative. Joined by ace musicians such as Steve Holley, Liberty DeVitto and Thommy Price, among others, Byrd punches hard on gutsy rockers like "Quittin' Time (Again)" and "Together," while he sprinkles some rugged Stones/Faces flavor throughout an inspired cover of Merle Haggard's country classic "Tonight the Bottle Let Me Down."

As for the album's title, Byrd admits that it carries a dual meaning. "We were finishing it right when the pandemic hit," he says. "I was on the phone with somebody, and I said, 'These are sobering times.' And then it hit me: That's just perfect. The thing about recovery, if you're lucky enough to find your way through, is that you realize you have no control over it, and if you don't change, you're gonna die. The title can definitely relate to what we've all been going through for the past year."

What makes you pick up the guitar these days? Is there some sort of new secret you're still trying to unlock?

Of course. I'm amazed that I still go, "Wow. I've never played that freaking line before." Each time I pick up a guitar, whether it's acoustic or electric, it leads me in a different direction, especially when it comes to songwriting. When I was writing this record, I tuned to an open E for a couple of things, and that led me somewhere new. But if I'm just playing, I can get into a meditative state. Or maybe I'll put on some blues. I'll play along to an Elmore James record, and I'll just go into its world. That's still the greatest feeling.



RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Sobering Times

"Quittin' Time (Again)," "Together," "I Come Back Stronger," "Recover Me," "Life Is Good," "Just Like You"

Of course, I can get that same feeling from watching baseball for four hours. [*laughs*]

You've been solo for a while. Do you ever miss being in band?

Sometimes, sure. A few years ago, I put together a really cool blues band with [*bassist*] Amy Madden and [*drummer*] Bobby T. Torello. We played clubs in the city, just for fun. I had my Flying V and a little Fender amp. It was a blast and we kicked some ass.

I don't miss the whole rigamarole of planning a tour. I don't think I could go on the road now for months at a time. I'm just not that guy anymore. But yeah, being in a band was a big part of my life for years. When I was with Jett, we toured constantly. And if we weren't on tour, we were recording new stuff. It was hard work. The older I get, the harder it is to be in that lifestyle. But I'm lucky in that I get called to do cool events with big stars — well, before the pandemic. That kind of thing keeps me on my toes. But as far as having a regular band? Unless you have a giant, successful band, that's expensive to keep afloat.

After you left the Blackhearts, were you nervous about making the transition from guitar-player guy to frontman?

No, because I've always been a singer. Even before the Blackhearts, I used to sing in bands. For me, when I went solo, it was more like, "Okay, who am I as an artist?" At the beginning, I put together these little bands in New York and everything sounded like bad Stones. I was like, "That's not it yet." So it took a while, but it was cool.

I got sober and I got myself a publishing deal. I was looking forward to being home while I wrote songs for Sony, and then I got a call from Roger Daltrey to do a record. So I did that. We made *Rocks in the Head* half here and half at Abbey Road. After that, I got a call from Ian Hunter, and I did a Scandinavian tour with him. There was a long period where I was just trying to see what I sounded like. I didn't do my own record until 2013, which was *Lifer*. And at that point, I realized who I was.

"THE TITLE CAN DEFINITELY RELATE TO WHAT WE'VE ALL BEEN GOING THROUGH FOR THE PAST YEAR"

The overall sound of *Sobering Times* is what you're known for — bluesy, British-inspired guitar rock.

Sure. I'm a product of all the music I listened to as a kid, and I'm not ashamed to nod to my influences. That could be anything from Sweet to the Stones and the Faces. There's the Who, the Kinks, maybe a little Dylan and Lou Reed. When I make a record, instead of trying to come up with a new rock-and-roll sound, I'm reverting back to myself as a 13-year-old kid listening to music on my headphones. That's what makes me happy.

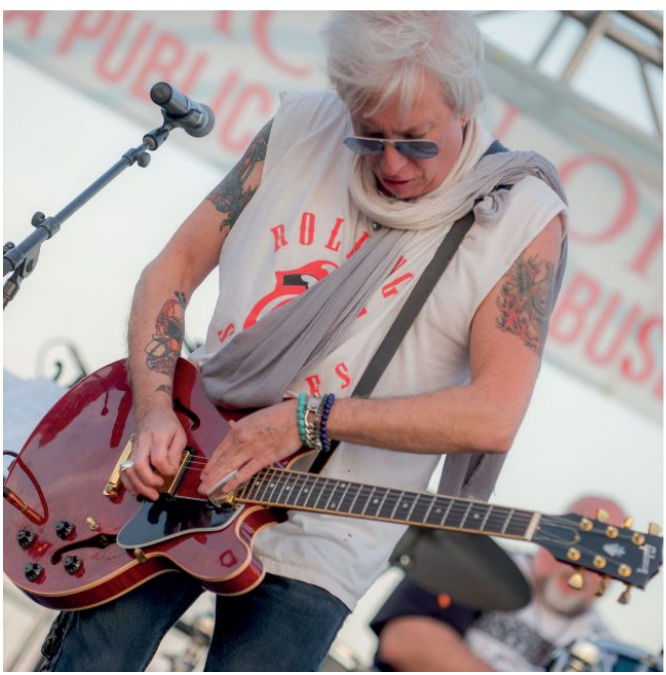
Take me into the nuts and bolts of your guitar sound on the record.

It's funny. When I was in the Blackhearts, I was a Marshall guy — Marshall half-stacks. Now they're just too loud for me. My favorite amp these days is a little 15-watt Fender Pro Junior. The thing is so tiny, but it's got power. I've also got a Fender Champ that I love plugging into.

Guitar-wise, I used my '90s Epiphone Flying V, and there's my '75 blue-sparkle Les Paul and my '73 Les Paul. For 12-string stuff, I played a Denelectro. I have a '73 Telecaster, but I can honestly say I'm not a Strat guy. If I'm going to use a Fender, it's a Tele. For acoustics, I used my '69 Gibson Hummingbird, an '87 Martin HD-28 and a 1966 National that has the "Gumby" headstock.

Of course, those Marshalls sounded great on "I Love Rock 'n' Roll." Do you ever get tired of hearing that song?

Phfft. No! [*laughs*] Of course not. I walk into a store and I hear that song. It's like, how blessed am I? That's what I've wanted since I was 13. It doesn't get cooler than that. Anybody who gets tired of hearing themselves on the radio or wherever, I can't understand that. Things could be worse.



JEFF SMITH



Baggs' Voiceprint Acoustic D.I. pedal shown with the AcousticLive app for iPhone

TECH EDUCATION

Once an analog man, Lloyd Baggs used digital know-how to revolutionize acoustic amplification with Voiceprint Acoustic D.I.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

FOR MORE THAN four decades, Lloyd Baggs and his company, L.R. Baggs, have routinely upped the ante for acoustic-electric tone. Baggs began as a luthier working closely with Ry Cooder. Through a bizarre incident involving a guitar Baggs made for the guitarist, Takamine's pickup system and Cooder's disdain for his unwieldy road rig, Baggs became focused on acoustic amplification. He's been an analog man all along, creating ever-improving pickup systems, preamps and direct boxes. More recently, Baggs released the Synapse Personal P.A. and a range of Align acoustic effects. Both earned *Guitar Player* Editors' Pick awards and represented the company's first wadings into the digital waters. Baggs' newest innovation, the Voiceprint D.I. ($399 street) is a headlong dive into the deep end.

Voiceprint is a direct-input stompbox for acoustic-electric guitars that works in conjunction with Baggs' new AcousticLive app on iPhone via Bluetooth. Using the iPhone's microphone, it maps the guitar's acoustic sound qualities while taking the player's style into consideration. Voiceprint concurrently gathers pickup information and relays it to the iPhone. The app is designed to reckon both signals and create a custom filter that mitigates troublesome characteristics and highlights those that are most appealing. The resulting tone may sound as if it were captured using a great studio mic, but nothing is added, other than a bit of ambience due to the guitar's distance from the phone. Voiceprint also identifies feedback hot spots and creates a custom cancellation curve, plus a customizable EQ. Saved presets are sent to the pedal for easy recall in musical environments.

Voiceprint works its magic using Impulse Response signal processing, the same technology behind the Kemper Profiler amplifier and Fishman's breakthrough Aura imaging pedal. In fact, Larry Fishman at Fishman Electronics is Lloyd Baggs' primary competitor. Their friendly rivalry has led to a host of fantastic inventions on the acoustic-electric frontier, and we guitar players continue to reap the rewards.



What's the Voiceprint origin story?

It started with the Fishman Aura, and I've got to give Larry props for doing that. He's a real innovator. A number of years ago, when Pete Newport owned Breedlove and Fishman had come out with the Aura, Pete scheduled Larry and me to address his reps at the NAMM Show. His reps said, "What's your answer to the Aura?" I didn't have one. So the Anthem was born out of that. It was called Anthem because it was our answer to the Aura.



Lloyd Baggs

How so?

I've never been a fan of modeling. It doesn't feel like the guitar you're playing, since the model didn't grow from that guitar. Our company has always been about delivering a real feel, maybe even before sound. So when the Aura came out, I thought it was going in the right direction, but its images weren't based on my guitar, and I didn't want my guitar to sound or feel like anyone else's. The question was, "How am I going to capture the sound of my guitar more faithfully?"

As [*fingerstyle guitarist*] Doug Young said recently on a forum, "The worst mic sounds better than the best pickup." I started working further with microphones. The Duet was probably the first blended system with a pickup and a mic in a guitar, but we used the microphone mostly to deodorize the pickup. We set the crossover just so you could get some of the texture in the high end because you couldn't get very far down into the frequency response of the guitar without trouble. The inside of a guitar sounds like a garbage can. It's full of echoes and stuff.

The idea for the Anthem was to invent a mic that could capture the guitar's entire range and sound like it was placed outside. We did that by creating a pressure-zone microphone. It won't hear your voice, and it doesn't hear the trashy sounds inside the guitar either, but it will pick up wood vibrations within the pressure zone. We place it three millimeters from the top below the undersaddle pickup, which adds a little more stability to the system. We still use a crossover, but we run the mic down to 250 cycles, which is the low midrange. On a guitar, the money is in the midrange. Now we can essentially capture the voice of the instrument with the microphone instead of the pickup. That flips the equation. The pickup becomes almost like a subwoofer. Instead of getting maybe 20 percent microphone over the top of a pickup, it's 20 percent of the pickup supplementing 80 percent from the mic. The Anthem is our ultimate analog achievement in representing the most accurate sound of the guitar. The Anthem system was our best combination of fidelity and stability until the Voiceprint.

"RY COODER USED TO SWEAR AT HIS TOURING RIG AND TELL OF ALL THESE NIGHTMARE SCENARIOS. THOSE STORIES STUCK WITH ME"

When and how did the Voiceprint project get underway?

I'm proud of what we've accomplished with analog, but about four or five years ago I started to feel like a blacksmith at the turn of the last century. Pretty much everything in our daily lives has become digital, but, really, two-thirds of what you're hearing in every digital-audio situation is still analog. The guitar sound and the sound coming out of the speaker are both analog; only the middle part is digital. Since we'd gone to great lengths to make our analog circuits sound as good as a Neve or an SSL console, all we needed to learn was the middle part.

For Voiceprint, we assembled an international team of PhDs, including Dr. Jonathan Abel. He's a professor at Stanford in artificial intelligence and the co-founder of Universal Audio. But it all started by creating the digital reverb for the Synapse P.A. in-house with our digital engineer, Justin Rucker, and our lead engineer, Tommy Linn. When he introduced the idea of using the iPhone's mic for Voiceprint, we all thought it was a joke. We considered its audio quality like a G.I. Joe Walkie Talkie. But the iPhone mic turned out to be a fantastic tool.

How does it work?

There are all sorts of settings you can customize with the iPhone's mic. Our app turns off everything that's not useful and transforms it into a measuring device. We use Impulse Response measurements to learn everything about your guitar and the way you play it, and our design is such that it can even be done in a noisy environment because the background noise is filtered out. We've essentially taken the room out of the equation. Simultaneously, the pedal gathers the signal from your pickup and sends it to the phone via Bluetooth. So now the phone has a concurrent sample, and its processor is powerful enough to do the math to generate a filter, which can be customized by the user, saved into the phone and sent to the box.

The filter simulates the sound of a high-quality mic placed perfectly outside your guitar?

Somewhat, but we're not necessarily trying to get a studio mic sound; we're just trying to analyze the nuances of that particular instrument and the player's touch. The measurement gives you a precise graph of the guitar's acoustic response — its amplitude and frequency response. And it precisely identifies the peaks at which the guitar will feed back. Attack those digitally and you can get a better amplified sound without feedback than with some of the old manual ways. Another big advantage is that Voiceprint analyzes exactly how that pickup responds. So the connection between how you play that pickup, the filter you create and what happens after the fact when you tap into that preset is minimizing the variables.

Does that put you in competition with yourself? Why buy a high-end pickup system if the sound is going to be replaced by Voiceprint?

Voiceprint democratizes the custom process, and it is the great pickup equalizer. But I can't say that our filter is so complete that it eradicates the character of the host pickup. If you use a magnetic sound-hole pickup, the Voiceprint will still have some of that character. If you use an Anthem system to generate an impulse response for a Voiceprint, the result will be slightly better than one from a simple undersaddle piezo pickup. But doggone, it sure makes our Element pickup sound fantastic too!

It all goes back to how I got into acoustic amplification. I had built a guitar for Ry Cooder, and I was at his house a lot. He used to swear at his touring rig because it was the size of a refrigerator, and he'd tell of all these nightmare scenarios, like the time it got dropped off of a plane in Tokyo. Those stories stuck with me. My whole quest has been to make it easy to get a real sound, ever since I made my very first pickup.



Chris Stein onstage with Blondie at Project Pabst, Portland, Oregon, July 18, 2015

MY CAREER IN FIVE SONGS

He's a huge Flatt & Scruggs fan, but Blondie's **Chris Stein** put his signature on the punk era with these five tracks.

BY JOE BOSSO

WHILE MANY '70s punk bands reveled in looking disturbing and outrageous, the New York sextet Blondie appeared to spring directly from the pages of *Vogue*. A highly photogenic lot, the male members of the group routinely sported crisp, matching suits and neatly coiffed hairdos that echoed the Mod fashion sense made famous in Britain a decade earlier. And it certainly didn't hurt things that their charismatic singer, Debbie Harry, had the kind of glamorous, movie-star good looks that were made for the camera.

"People assume that we had a master plan for how we presented ourselves, but it wasn't that way at all," says Chris Stein, the guitarist and songwriter who co-founded the band with Harry in 1974. "The guys all had long hair when we started out, and then we gradually started getting haircuts. We were very attracted to the Mod style and even a *West Side Story* motif, so that began to evolve. And Debbie was always inventing and reinventing her own look against the backdrop of what we were doing. Once we had it down, it seemed to fit."

Of course, a successful band can't make it on beauty alone, and Blondie, rising from New York City clubs like CBGB and Max's Kansas City, proved to be a crafty group of pop hitmakers. On their 1976 eponymous debut and 1977's *Plastic Letters*, elements of high-energy punk decadence mixed with a reverential '60s girl-group sound, and tracks like "Denis," a sparkling update of the 1963 hit for Randy & the Rainbows, and "(I'm Always Touched by Your) Presence, Dear" (written by then-bassist Gary Valentine) hinted at things to come. By the time of the band's third album, 1978's *Parallel Lines*, the songwriting team of Stein and Harry, with assists from keyboardist Jimmy Destri and new bassist Nigel Harrison, was firing on all cylinders. The breakthrough record, packing the radio-ready production of Mike Chapman, included hits like "Sunday Girl," "One Way or Another" and the disco-flavored number one "Heart of Glass."

"I ALWAYS LIKED DISCO. IT'S JUST AN EXTENSION OF R&B"

"The first couple of records were a little rough and punk edged," Stein says. "We were kind of eclectic and all over the place. With *Parallel Lines*, things were more polished and stylized. I don't know if it was a conscious decision to find a specific sound. We were just

ANTHONY PIDGEON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

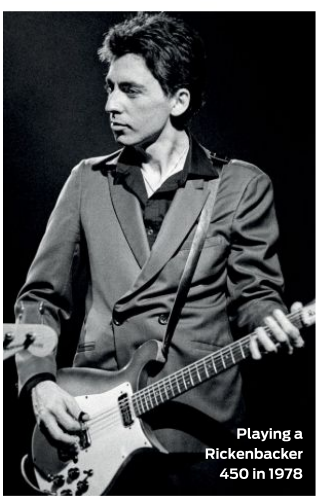
doing what we liked. And I give a lot of credit to Mike Chapman. He was like a film director. He was charming, witty and a lot of fun, no matter what he put us through."

During Blondie's chart heyday — which included three more number ones: 1980's "Call Me" and "The Tide is High," and 1981's "Rapture" — Stein relied mostly on Fender Stratocasters. His favorite was a 1956 model that he still regrets selling some years back. "I gravitated to Strats because I loved Hendrix," he explains. "He was a real hero of mine. He had the technical side down, but it was kind of secondary to the emotion he brought to his playing."

A striking aspect of Stein's technique is his use of fingerpicks, which he began in his pre-rock-and-roll days. "I started as a folkie and was a huge Flatt & Scruggs fan," he recalls. "Earl Scruggs used fingerpicks on his banjo, of course, but Lester Flatt used them on his guitar. Then one of the very first electric bands I saw was the Blues Project, and I noticed that Danny Kalb played with fingerpicks. I started doing it myself. It's kind of tricky at first, but you get into it. And I've been doing it ever since."

RIP HER TO SHREDS
BLONDIE (1976)

"It's a total homage to 'I'm Waiting for the Man' by the Velvet Underground. It was kind of funny how the Velvets came out with their first album in 1967, right in the middle of all the hippie stuff. Everybody was peace and love, and here's this dark record with songs about heroin and murder and stuff. The people in my crowd thought it was great.



BRIAN COOKE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Playing a Rickenbacker 450 in 1978

"Deborah and I wrote this one together. We had an easy kind of collaboration. It was always back and forth with us. I would play something on guitar and suggest a melody, and she'd embellish it. I would occasionally do lyrics. That wasn't my main thing.

"We recorded the first album at a really great studio called Plaza Sound, which was on top of Radio City Music Hall. Richard Gottehrer produced the first two albums, and he was sensational. We pretty much tracked everything like we were doing a live show. There were some overdubs, but not many. Things moved fast. We started getting into more production on later albums. I didn't mess around with my guitar sound too much. I used my Strat and a Marshall amp, sometimes a Fender amp. We didn't have too much gear back then."

HANGING ON THE TELEPHONE
PARALLEL LINES (1978)

"This song was written by Jack Lee from the Nerves. They were a really cool band from L.A. that started up around the same time as Blondie. They had already put the song out on an EP of theirs in 1976, but not too many people heard it. A mutual friend of ours, Jeffrey Lee Pierce from the Gun Club, gave me a cassette mix tape, and this song was on it. I was in the back of a taxicab in Tokyo, oddly enough, and I put it on.

"Sometimes the tiniest of things can mean a lot. I put the song on and was listening to it, and I started to watch the cab driver. He was this old guy, but he was tapping his fingers on the steering wheel to the song. I thought to myself, Hey, if he likes it, maybe this song has universal appeal.

"I'm very fond of the Nerves' original. It's a bit more Beatles-esque than what we did to the song. We made our version more urgent and ferocious — more punk. By this time, we were working with Mike Chapman, and he had a lot of great ideas. He wanted us to kick the song up and add a guitar solo, which wasn't on the original. The song became a hit for us, which was nice. My attitude at the time was, 'It's either all or nothing.'"



GIE KNAEPS/GETTY IMAGES

Onstage in Amsterdam, November 19, 1977. (from left) Jimmy Destri, Frank Infante, Nigel Harrison, Debbie Harry and Stein

HEART OF GLASS
PARALLEL LINES (1978)

"The song appeared on *Parallel Lines*, but we had written it much earlier. My go-to method for making demos was working on a TEAC four-track that I had in the house. This song went through several incarnations on a bunch of different demos. Our songs would often refer to other things, and I was influenced a bit by 'Rock the Boat' by the Hues Corporation. I always liked disco. It's just an extension of R&B. I like the Bee Gees' early rock stuff, but their *Saturday Night Fever* material is my favorite.

"As we were getting ready to make *Parallel Lines*, Mike Chapman asked us to run through our material. When we were done, he



With bassist Nigel Harrison in London making a promo for "(I'm Always Touched by Your) Presence Dear," May 8, 1978

BRIAN COOKE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

asked if we had anything else, and we were like, 'Yeah, we got this older song.' We played it, and he really liked it. I knew it had some potential, so we went for it.

"It all evolved out of a Roland CR-78 drum machine, synchronized with a VCF [*voltage-controlled filter*] on a Roland synth, which was a big deal at the time. This was pre MIDI, so everything was voltage controlled. We structured the song with the synth playing the chords, and then everything else was layered around that. The whole thing was done in pieces; there was no playing live in the studio. Mike was like Stanley Kubrick. We did stuff over and over.

"As we went, the song started to sound more European. Frankie [*Infante*] did the little guitar riff throughout, and that was kind of brilliant. I'm doing those whooshing sounds on my guitar — that's me going through a [*Roland*] Space Echo. It took us years to figure out how to do a live version because everything had to sync up in time. It's kind of stabilized now, but we went through so many approaches with it onstage."

FADE AWAY AND RADIATE
PARALLEL LINES (1978)

"I was a Robert Fripp fan. I had listened to King Crimson back in the day, and I loved what he did with Bowie on 'Heroes.' I remember he approached us after a show at the Palladium in New York. We just became buddies after that. He would come up and play shows with us. We'd learn some songs with him. It was great.

"I don't think there was any big discussion about bringing him into the studio. It happened very naturally. This song was kind of ethereal and otherworldly, things I associate with Robert's playing, so it seemed like something he'd be great on. I didn't really have to explain anything to him. A guy like Robert knows what to do, and you want him because of who he is and what he does. He plugged in his black Les Paul and did the take really fast. It was marvelous.

"I'm still in touch with him. I hear from him occasionally. He's just a great guy — a real gentleman and super professional."

"'HEART OF GLASS' WAS DONE IN PIECES. THERE WAS NO PLAYING LIVE IN THE STUDIO"

RAPTURE
AUTOAMERICAN (1980)

"We loved Chic, so we did this song as our homage to them. But it's also our homage to the early rap and hip-hop scene, which was very exciting. Fab 5 Freddy took us up to an event in the Bronx, and it was the first time I'd been exposed to a live rap event. I'd heard 'Rapper's Delight,' but seeing this music performed in front of me was amazing. I was really moved and grew attracted to it.

"It didn't take long to write this one. It was all built around the bass line, really. Without that bass, you don't have a song. I doubled the bass on guitar, and then I did the other rhythm stuff. I used my fingerpicks on this track, although sometimes I used flatpicks in the studio. The guitar stuff is very minimal, but that's the whole point. You listen to those Chic records, and they're very stripped down, but they're punchy and powerful.

"Frankie has that amazing solo at the end of the song, right after the line, 'And now he only eats guitars.' It's one of my favorite things that he ever did. It's just great. We had pretty late hours and were working a long time on the song, so I think I was passed out in the lounge when he cut it. I was really happy with what he did, so I didn't think that I could better it.

"We turned the album in, and, famously, the people at Chrysalis said, 'We don't hear any singles on it.' And then we ended up having two number-one hits with 'Rapture' and 'The Tide Is High.' So there you go. That just goes to show you who you should listen to."



With Tommy Kessler at the Roundhouse, London, July 7, 2013 in London, England

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Big Bottom

Designed for bassists, the Fender Bassman became the favored tone machine of guitarists everywhere.

YOU KNOW A design is special when it attains "classic" status not just in its most iconic iteration but in several revamped versions. Such is the Fender Bassman. First introduced in 1952 as a 1x15 combo, the tweed Bassman hit its stride in the late '50s as the narrow-panel 4x10 5F6A combo, which achieved major crossover success with six-stringers and became known as one of the greatest guitar amps of all time. By 1961, however, the Bassman had evolved beyond all recognition into an amplifier that was very different both inside and out. It was bigger, bolder and more accurately bass-intended. And it proved yet again to be another classic design for electric guitar.

At the turn of that decade, Fender's tweed combos evolved into two new lineups, both very different from anything that had come before and boldly signaling the way forward for modern guitar-amp production. Aside from the top-mounted Champ, all models had forward-facing control panels enameled with a dark-brown background. The combos were covered in light-brown Tolex, at the time a new, durable vinyl product (the Vibrasonic and Concert in this range actually debuted in 1959), while the head-and-cab models received flashier blonde Tolex cosmetics. The latter comprised what Fender called its Professional Series, a range of "piggyback" sets that helped establish the standard for bigger amps intended for larger venues. It included the powerful Showman, Dual Showman, Bandmaster, Tremolux and Bassman models.

The 1962 Bassman, shown here, is the 6G6B, the third of three rapid iterations of the model following its introduction as the 6G6 a year earlier, and it's nearly as different inside from its predecessor, the tweed 5F6A Bassman, as it clearly appears outside. Some people like to call the brownface Fenders of the early '60s a cross between tweed and blackface amps, but as we'll see, they're really a lot closer to the latter.

Chief among this Bassman's evolved characteristics is the new preamp design that all of them carry. It points to the one that Leo and company were moving toward and has relatively few traces of the tweed topology from just a year or two before. Part of the key to "the tweed sound," for the bigger amps at least, was a signal chain that hit the volume

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BY DAVE HUNTER



control right after the first gain stage (which comprised half of a preamp tube), followed by a full tube configured as a gain stage and cathode follower, which drove a tone stack placed after it.

The setup in these brownface amps, and those with black control panels that followed, is almost the reverse of that. The signal hits the tone controls after the first gain stage, then passes through the volume control before entering another half-a-preamp tube used as a gain-makeup stage to bolster signal levels depleted on the journey through all the circuitry thus far. More important than how it's all done, though, is the tonal shift that results from the circuit change. In place of the chewy, midrange-pronounced sonic signature of the tweed amps, the Fenders of the early and mid '60s sounded tighter, glassier and more mid-scooped. They ushered in a whole new classic that was still entirely Fender. The new Bassmans also replaced the tweed Bassman's tube rectifier with solid-state diodes, a change that helped firm up the low end and the amps' overall punchiness and tightness.

It's worth noting that this analysis (rectifier aside) applies primarily to the Bassman's Normal channel. Its Bass channel was an entirely different beast and quite an oddball, representing an early effort to enhance the low-end. Plug a six-string electric guitar into the Bassman's Normal channel, though, and you're tapping into a simple three-knob sensation that countless players have recognized as a toothsome and inspiring tone generator.

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

- 50 watts from two 5881/6L6GC output tubes
- Four 7025 (12AX7) preamp tubes
- Bass and Normal channels with volume, treble and bass; shared presence
- Piggyback head atop closed-back extension cabinet
- Two 12" Jensen or Oxford speakers
- Blonde Tolex covering with wheat grille cloth

With all that said, the blonde 6G6B Bassman was still a little like its tweed predecessor in its use of a 12AX7/7025 preamp tube in the phase inverter and a presence control common to both channels, which provided a final means of adjusting the signal's high-end content at the output stage. The former drives the output tubes a little harder than the lower-gain 12AT7 that Fender switched to for the blackface amps of '64, inducing a slightly earlier breakup and a little more grit even in so-called clean tones. The latter provides a broader and smoother tweaking of the amp's overall brightness, and feels very different from the all-or-nothing (and often brittle-sounding) bright switches Fender moved to as the brownface designs fell by the wayside.

THE PREAMP DESIGN POINTS TO THE ONE THAT LEO WAS MOVING TOWARD, AND HAS FEW TRACES OF THE TWEED TOPOLOGY

There were several other changes between the 6G6B of late '62 and '63 and the AA864 Bassman circuit of '64, but these two alone helped to make the blonde head a little more approachable and "just right" to some players' ears. And we haven't even mentioned the tremendous change made by running all this tubular goodness into a closed-back extension cabinet with two 12-inch speakers rather than the tweed Bassman's open-back combo cab with four 10-inch speakers, which is generally heard as a shift to more lower-midrange meat and low-end thump, a tighter upper midrange and more directionality.

Former Stray Cat and eternal rockabilly sensation Brian Setzer is likely the most famous proponent of the blonde Bassman. Pete Townshend also gave a similar head a good workout with the Who before moving to Marshall and then Sound City/Hiwatt amps, and Michael Bloomfield frequently used one in the latter part of his career. The slightly changed-up black-panel/black-Tolex Bassman of '64–'67 also became a go-to for several noteworthy players, Mike Ness of Social Distortion among them. A used '60s Bassman's relative affordability on the used market in the '70s, '80s and '90s made the amps popular with lots of punk, grunge and alt-rockers through those decades as well. All that, and a few bass players used them now and then, too.



Fender's Professional Series of piggyback amp and cabinets helped create the standard for bigger amps intended for larger venues.



BY JIM CAMPILONGO

Treasure Island

The music of Trio Matamoros is alive with Cuba's long-lost bolero-son traditions.

I DISCOVERED THE music of Trio Matamoros at a record store a few doors down from my place in Brooklyn. I walked past the shop many times but resisted going in because the window displayed LPs one could find at any suburban garage sale. The owner, who ran the place for five decades, showed up like clockwork every day, wearing a suit and tie, and with dyed, pitch-black hair. I love Brooklyn.

When I finally wandered into the store one day, the owner looked me up and down and showed me a Barbara Streisand LP. I shook my head, no. Despite the language barrier, I asked him for old Latin music. "Old," I said, "old. *Viejo!*" Out of nowhere, he pulled a Trio Matamoros LP. I got a good feeling from the cover, and it was exactly what I was looking for. This was music performed by talented musicians who could easily set up anywhere and captivate an audience without any frills. Most of these tracks could have been performed live in my living room. This discovery led me to an album search a few years later in Bogata, Colombia. After finding an amazing record store, I had to purchase an additional suitcase to bring stacks of LPs, many by Trio Matamoros, back to the States. I was buying records made and purchased with love in the '60s and '70s. These albums had soul! Take that, Spotify!



Trio Matamoros was formed in 1925 by guitarist singer composer Miguel Matamoros, with Rafael Cueto on guitar and vocals, and Siro Rodríguez on vocals, maracas and claves. In 1971, RCA released *Trio Matamoros Coleccionista*, a compilation of 10-inch sides from 1925 to 1935. These tracks are an amazing collection of Cuban bolero-son, presenting the unique and dynamic sound forged by Matamoros and his cohorts. They feature Louvin Brothers–style three-part harmonies with seductive phrasing and hypnotic call and responses, along with a driving groove topped off with perfectly placed hot guitar arpeggios.

THEIR MUSIC IS SO MUCH FROM THE HEART, ONE CAN INTUITIVELY FEEL WHAT THEY ARE SINGING ABOUT

"El Que Siembra Su Maiz," which opens side one, was recorded in Camden, New Jersey, in 1928. Despite being almost a century old, it sounds remarkably current. I suspect this might have been remastered, but the original spirit is intact. The bass and percussion percolate, the guitars sing out, and Cueto's vocal performance is astounding and festive. The Miguel Matamoros composition "Olvido" is lovely, always aspiring for beauty and connection to the listener. The call and response of "*Lejos del olvido*" re-energizes itself and creates excitement with every chorus. Meanwhile, the two guitars intertwine with counterpoint, and harmonies dance above, pushing and pulling the beat. "Alma De Roca," recorded in New York City in 1935, features the vocals of Matamoros, who exhibits an angelic tenor vocal that cries out longingly about the possibilities of rekindling a love, while the group churns and grooves. "La Mujer De Antonio" is my favorite track on *Coleccionista*. The guitars of Matamoros and Cueto are stellar and sound so big. "Puro Amor," recorded in Havana Cuba in 1931, is another personal favorite. It's a lovely, endearing song about a man who has an overwhelming love for a woman but can't find the courage to tell her. As with many of the songs here, it has a humility that appeals to me. "El Paralitico" is another little masterpiece composed by Miguel Matamoros about a rebirth of life, while "El Manicero" features a repeating riff that I never tire of hearing.

Although I don't speak Spanish, I often intuitively know what Trio Matamoros is conveying. The emotions of heartbreak, joy and family all translate to me via the performances. I sometimes prefer to hear singing in a language I don't speak. Like the music of Duke Ellington or Ben Webster, the melodies and performances express the intangible so poignantly that there are no guessing games, and the music is so much from the heart, one can intuitively feel what they are singing about. To me, the music of Trio Matamoros is cleansing and wholesome.

Since I bought my first Trio Matamoros LP at my local record store, the shop's owner has passed away and a Dunkin' Donuts sits soullessly in its place. Every time I walk by the building, I feel the ghost of the old proprietor, sense the mirage of the store and feel the music of Trio Matamoros ringing somewhere in my heart, consoling another community loss. But I still love Brooklyn.

Look for Jim Campilongo and Luca Benedetti's new release, Two Guitars, *at cityhallrecords.com on CD and vinyl.*

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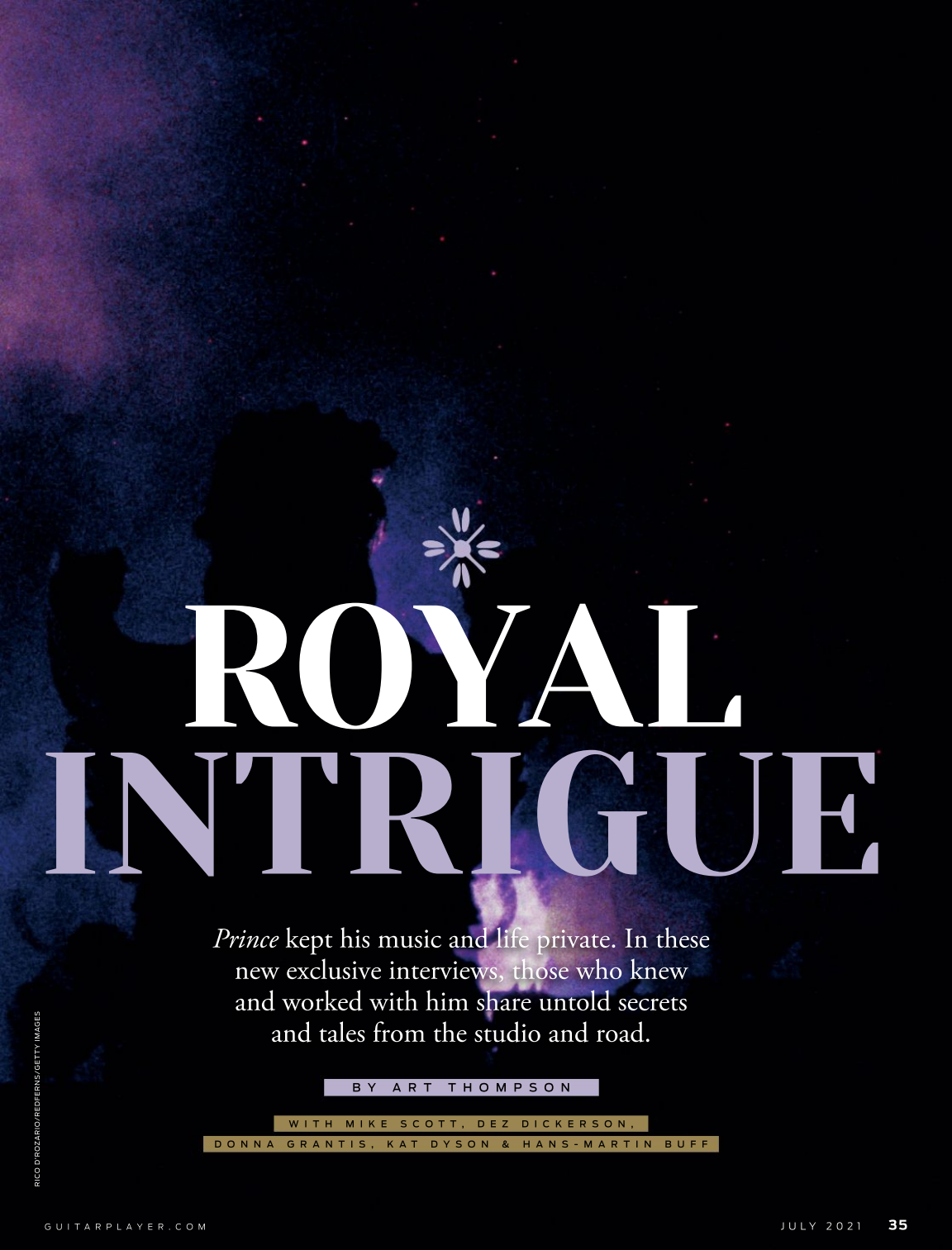
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ROYAL INTRIGUE

Prince kept his music and life private. In these new exclusive interviews, those who knew and worked with him share untold secrets and tales from the studio and road.

BY ART THOMPSON

WITH MIKE SCOTT, DEZ DICKERSON, DONNA GRANTIS, KAT DYSON & HANS-MARTIN BUFF

RICO D'ROZARIO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

The phenomenal body of work Prince created during his 57 years on Earth testifies to his genius for songwriting, his sheer musicality and his awesome guitar skills. But Prince was unique in that he processed similarly high-level skills when it came to recording, producing, choreography… You name it.

Prince, who seemed born to become the high priest of pop/funk, drew the inevitable guitar and showmanship comparisons to Jimi Hendrix and James Brown, and he was certainly the funkiest dude around, even though he loved hard rock and psychedelic music and drew from influences wherever he found them. His work ethic was unstoppable, and he drove those around him to rise to their utmost abilities, and then take it a notch further. The ultimate manifestation of his all-or-nothing approach to just about everything was, of course, Paisley Park, his Minneapolis-based headquarters, where he drilled his musicians relentlessly, recorded music practically nonstop, and basically inspired everyone to be all they could be. If you were invited to be in Prince's band — which in itself was a litmus test that hinged on one's musical skills and creativity — it was implicit that you were signing on to work at the same grueling pace that Prince demanded of himself. That included rehearsals that lasted for hours, mandatory choreography for the stage show, and then the studio sessions that all band members were on call for virtually any time of the day or night.

"PRINCE WAS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE, AND GOD ONLY MADE ONE OF HIM. YOU WOULD LEAVE THERE A BETTER MUSICIAN"
— MIKE SCOTT

Those who felt like they had earned the right to play alongside Prince might have been surprised by the sort of boot-camp mentality that existed within Paisley's confines, but with it came the lessons that Prince imparted to his players — lessons unavailable anywhere else — and the payoff for being brought into his world was a high-paying gig that practically guaranteed a musician would leave the band a better musician when the time came to move on.

"He single-handedly helped me become the guitar player that I am today," says Mike Scott, a blazingly skilled guitarist who had worked with the rap/R&B duo Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis (among many others) before joining Prince in 1996. Scott toured extensively with New Power Generation and contributed to the albums *Emancipation*, *Crystal Ball*, *The Truth* and *Newpower Soul*. "As far as a lead player, I was a little more technical than Prince was because I was listening to Return to Forever, Al Di Meola, the Mahavishnu Orchestra and stuff like that," Scott says. "But when I would take solos with him onstage, he was like, 'Man, all those notes don't mean nothing because they don't translate in an arena. I'll hold a high note and have people screaming while you play 100 notes, and nobody's going to hear what you did.' That was one of the most important things he ever told me, and there were so many moments like that, and so many things he shared that made me a much better player. Prince was a great guitarist and he was a showman — he knew how to bring a crowd to their knees — so I would color outside the lines. I would take solos that had more theory behind them as opposed to just doing crazy pentatonic stuff like he'd been doing forever."

How did you two work out what tones you would use for certain songs?

One day he called me out because I had taken a distortion solo. He said, "Hey, Mike, I just did a fast song and I took a distortion solo. What do you think I should use: distortion or clean?" And I said, "Well, if you just used distortion in the first solo, then I would go clean. And he goes, "That's right. Don't ever step on a distortion pedal after I've taken a solo. If I take a distortion solo, you take a clean solo. So for the rest of the tour, distortion was bad. But one night, an opportunity came up during the "Purple Rain" chorus. He steps on his distortion pedal and he had nothing


Mike Scott

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE SCOTT



KEVIN MAZUR/WIREIMAGE FOR NPG RECORDS 2011/GETTY IMAGES

Performing on his Welcome 2 America tour, at Madison Square Garden, New York City, February 7, 2011

— his rig was out. So he points at me and shouts, "Take a solo," and I got to rip the shit out of that "Purple Rain" solo once in the whole time I was with him. At the end of the night, he said, "Did you enjoy that? You'll never get to take that solo again!" [*laughs*]

Did Prince want you to play certain guitars?

He had me playing hollowbody guitars a lot. I was playing a PRS Hollowbody II Piezo the last time I was with him, and he told me, "I love that Hollowbody sound, and I love that you can go to acoustic." I run the magnetic and piezo pickups at the same time, and I blend them. I run a Dunlop Rotovibe on the clean Hollowbody sound, and I put the acoustic pickup straight through a Fishman or a Hughes & Kettner acoustic amp, and it's an amazing wall of guitar. One of the last times I was out with him, Prince wanted me to play the same guitar he was playing, a Vox HDC-77. I don't know if he thought I was going to be mad about it, but any advice he gave me, I would jump right on it. So I called Vox that same evening and had them send me two HDC-77s. That guitar is badass. It does single-coil, humbucker and P-90 in the same pickup. It's a very versatile guitar. It can sound very Strat- or Tele-like, and the humbucker is just balls to the wall. So I understood why he was playing that guitar. I started playing one, and I still do.

What are some things you did that you know impressed him?

Sometimes he'd play something and say, "Do a harmony to this." And it would blow his mind because I never had to practice that stuff. There's a live video of us playing in London, and he broke the band down and just had me play by myself, and I was playing this guitar part that was a combination of my part and his part — and then he changed keys and I was still doing it in two-part harmony. That impressed him. When I started working with him in '96, he had a studio tech named Hans Buff [*see interview, page 43*], and when I would go in and record, Hans would later tell me, "Man, Prince raves about you. He solos your parts out and he loses his mind." But I never saw any of that. I thought Prince hated my playing because he would always ride me and give me shit. But one day, he and I went for a limo ride to an after-show party, and we rode around town trying find a club to go to. That was the first time he and I talked just one on one. And he said, "Mike, you're a great player and a great musician. If you started believing in that, you would take over the world." That was the only time he gave me any kudos.

Did you ever have anything unusual happen on the road with him?

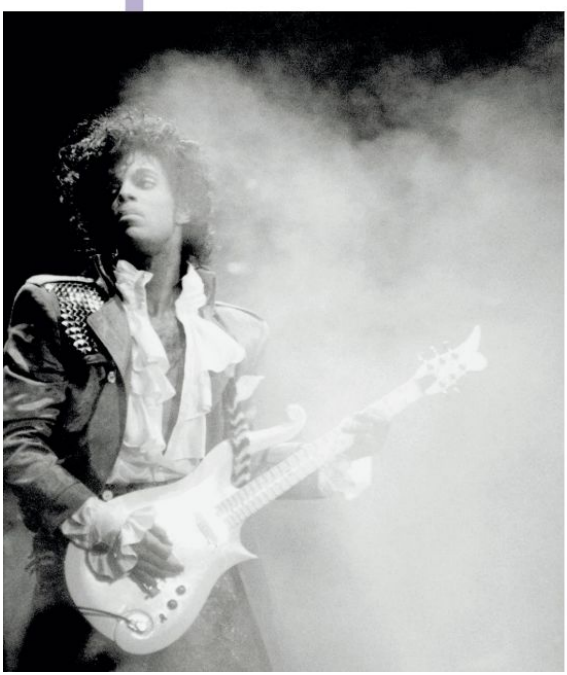
His rig blew up one night in London, just as he was pulling up in his limo, and it was because we were on British power and everything was on convertors. He had a buzz, and his tech, Takumi, was trying to get the buzz out, and his whole rig just went up in flames. He and I were both using four-foot racks at that time, and he had a Soldano SLO preamp with the auto faders, and that thing breathes fire. His lead tone was amazing, and he wasn't using pedals.

So his stuff went up in smoke, and he's now in the back of the venue asking why he can't come up and play. And we were panicking! I said, "Look, he only plays on the first song, so plug him into my rig and set me up with a Fender Twin, and then after the first song you all can figure it out while we're playing." So they plug him into my wireless system, and he comes up to the stage and grabs his guitar — and when Prince comes in a room, he's ready to play! He walked right onstage and we started jamming, and he walks over to me and says, "My guitar sounds amazing tonight." [*laughs*] He never knew he was playing through my rig, and I never told him.

Were you expected to own a part the minute Prince showed it to you? Did he have any advice for memorizing parts?

Yeah, he would show you something once, and he would not show you again. And he would know if you didn't play it exactly right. Sometimes he would show us stuff and we wouldn't remember it the next day. Like, you wouldn't remember this rhythm pattern that was bouncing off of the keyboard pattern that was bouncing off of the bass pattern. So he told the band to start taking ginkgo biloba [*a tree species known to enhance brain function*], because it's great for your memory. I started taking ginkgo, and it helped immensely. Prince would push you to the limits. Like, if you came in today for a rehearsal, he'd go, "I've got a new song," and we'd learn it. But we probably wouldn't play it for six months, and he would still expect us to play it just like you learned it today.

So besides all the drinking and ridiculousness going on on the tour bus, I would sit and go through his whole repertoire before the show, because you never knew what songs he was going to call, or even what the set list was going to be each night. That made it a challenge and made you have to step up your game, because everything you did had to be on point. And if you made a mistake, he would look at you and rub his fingers together, and that meant you got docked. One time he fined me $1,000. I said, "You'll never fine me again," and he never did. Although he did dock the whole band once, because he went to the bridge too early and we didn't follow him. He said, "I never make mistakes — you all made a mistake by not following me." So we all got fined.



On the *Purple Rain* tour with one of his custom Cloud guitars, at the Rosemont Horizon, Chicago, December 10 1984

That's an old-school way of running a band, like James Brown or something.

It doesn't happen anymore, because a lot of these shows have tracks playing in Pro Tools. I started playing with Justin Timberlake in 2008, and his show was based on choreography and lights, and nothing can change. It's the same show every night. With Prince, it was always a crap shoot. He used to say, "Real music played by real musicians." We may have played over a drum loop occasionally, but I don't think we ever played to Pro Tools. Prince was a learning experience, and God only made one of him. He was an amazing teacher and an amazing mentor. You definitely would leave there a better musician than you were when you came in.

DEZ DICKERSON

Dez Dickerson's rocket ride with Prince started when he answered a call for a touring musician in *The Twin Cities Reader*, a Minneapolis entertainment paper, in 1979. After a 15-minute audition behind a tire shop, he was chosen as guitarist for the group that would become Prince and the Revolution. Dickerson played the slinky guitar solo on "Little Red Corvette" and contributed vocals to it and the title track on the *1999* album. He appeared in the film *Purple Rain*, and wrote songs for Prince's side projects. His credits include writing "He's So Dull" by Vanity 6, and co-writing "Wild and Loose," "After Hi School" and "Cool" for the Time.

RICHARD E. AARON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

What did Prince initially dig about your guitar playing?
I was a Grand Funk Railroad fan, and that band influenced me more than anyone else. That whole power-trio, "the guitar is king" aspect of it is something that Prince loved, and he found ways to incorporate it. There were Hendrix influences and Carlos Santana influences, but there was other stuff too, and Prince always found ways to marry it with the groove, because that is who he was.

The first five Prince albums seemed to evolve in quantum leaps. How did that happen?
Yes, it was a quantum leap from *For You* to *1999*, and for the most part there was a practical process that expedited that development. One of the things that had a major impact was that, once the band was formed and we did the first couple of tours, Prince continued as he had from the beginning, where he went in and composed, performed, produced and recorded on his own. So the second record was a continuation of the first one in that sense. But the thing that changed is that, as we grew and kind of coalesced as an actual band, the rehearsing part — and I mean, like, six- to eight-hour rehearsals and jamming — began to have an impact on how he approached his process.

So he started to see himself more as a band guy than a solo artist?
One of the things he was very adamant about was us being a band, so over time he kind of absorbed and re-imagined his process. As we got into the later things, like *Dirty Mind* and *Controversy*, and definitely by the time we got to *1999*, in terms of what he and I did, he made space for me as a guitar player and this other set of influences and whatever else I brought. He made that part of what Prince and the Revolution became.

How did he develop his ideas?
A lot of those things developed in jams and rehearsals and sound checks and the tour bus. In the studio, he was always the guy that would go in with ideas and then iterate those ideas. But when he got to the point of *Dirty Mind* and onward, he always had his own studio, and that empowered him to do whatever he wanted to do. One of the most important developments in Prince's career was when he signed that initial recording contract, and his manager and attorney at the time negotiated a deal with Warner that was pretty impressive in that it gave him the unrestricted power to do what he wanted. So once the technology was in his hands and he didn't have to go in the studio with an engineer and the songs, it just became a continuous process, and it remained that way. Recording and creating was just what Prince did 24/7, and the songs reflected that. They would change in rehearsals and at sound check when we were touring. And they kept growing and changing.

"RECORDING AND CREATING WAS JUST WHAT PRINCE DID 24/7, AND THE SONGS REFLECTED THAT"
— DEZ DICKERSON

Did you and Prince talk much about guitars and gear?
As he began to define what the elements of his sound were, there was a point on one of the tours when he asked me to play a Telecaster, because he had those Hohner [*MadCat*] Teles that he loved. There was a unique sound to those inexpensive guitars that became what you recognized as his sound. So for a couple of tours we had sort of duplicate rigs. He was playing through a Mesa/Boogie, and even though I had been using Marshalls to that point, I started playing through a Mesa/Boogie. But then it kind of morphed back. Prince said, "I'm going to let you do what you do, and I'm going to do what I do," and he made space for the thing that I was bringing to it. We



NANCY HEYMAN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

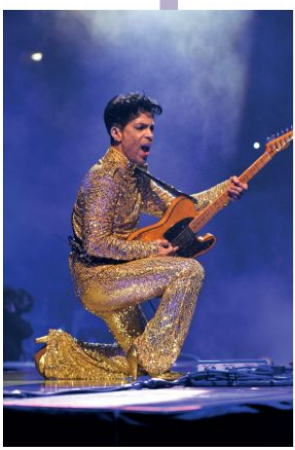
Prince and Dez Dickerson at the Palladium, New York CIty, December 2, 1981

had a conversation after a show one night, and he said, "I'm going to start focusing on being more of the entertainer and the frontman, and I'm not going to play guitar — I'm going to leave more of that to you." But Prince wasn't a gearhead who talked about pickups and string gauges. It was more a matter of the sound, and to his credit he gave me the space to be who I was and do what I did with the gear that I loved using. Prince knew what he liked and what got the sounds he wanted, so it wasn't like he had a huge pedalboard — it was just certain things. There were Boss pedals that he liked, and that was what he used. And once he moved to the Mesa amps, that was it, because the clean tone was exactly what he wanted when he played the Hohner Tele through it. When Prince found what he wanted, he stuck with it. Although, after I left the band, he experimented more with other gear and other sounds.

"I'M OF THE OPINION THAT PRINCE WAS RECORDING OUR REHEARSALS ALL THE TIME — EVEN THE BREAKS WHEN WE WERE JUST NOODLING AROUND"
— KAT DYSON

How did the Linn Drum impact Prince's sound?
He had one of the first ones off the line, and it instantly changed everything. He basically began to program single grooves and loop them and write around them, so there was a point in time — and obviously the *1999* album was the tipping point — where the Linn Drum became part of the sound. It wasn't at all surprising that he pulled it out of mothballs later and kind of went back to it. It's like somebody pulling out a guitar they used to play and coming back out with it. The Linn Drum had been a huge part of his process during that early period in time, and he basically used it as another voice in the music. So bringing it back made all the sense in the world to him.

Playing a Hohner MadCat Telecaster on the Welcome 2 America tour



How did it affect the live shows?
Prince was a fanatic about the pocket, and the Linn Drum created the perfect storm, where it played what you told it to play and would play it endlessly and not get tired and not talk back. So it was an important tool. When that era began, everything from that point forward was about playing to the click, because the Linn Drum demanded to be followed. Prince was a really good drummer himself, so he knew what he wanted the drummer to play, and once it was on record, that's what it was going to be. He could modify and change things, but the drums were kind of non-negotiable.



Kat Dyson at the Palm Springs Women's Jazz Festival, October 10, 2015

KAT DYSON

Guitarist Kat Dyson had expected to be auditioning for Sheila E. when Prince intervened and snapped-up the Montreal-based player for his own band, the New Power Generation. Dyson performed with Prince from 1996 to 1998 (rejoining again in 2005), and her spectacular guitar work graced the albums *Emancipation, The Truth* and *Newpower Soul*. Highlighting her versatility across a wide range of styles, Dyson has also worked with a cast of renowned artists, including Cyndi Lauper, Natalie Cole, Sheila E., Ivan Neville, Donny Osmond, rap artist T.I., Seal, Joi, and George Clinton and the P-Funk All Stars,

How did Prince communicate his guitar ideas to you?
When I was standing next to him at a rehearsal, he would just play something once and say, "Got it?" And then he would go sit on piano and expect me to play it perfectly. But he knew that my ear was acute, and that I was a listener who knew a few things about him. Everybody plays guitar differently, because of the size of their hands and the width of their fingers, and all that. So my experiences with Prince did bring me forward in the sum total of my technical knowledge and the way he expanded it, because of how he played and what he used to get the sounds he felt comfortable with.

Do you remember your first live performance with Prince?
The first thing I did was *Late Night With David Letterman*, which I think was one of the last obligations he had with Warner. We did a song called

KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES (PRINCE); SHERRY RAYN BARNETT/MICHAEL OCHS/GETTY IMAGES (DYSON)

"Dinner With Delores," and I played guitar and he played piano. So I played his parts and I played his solo, which was kind of a line-harmony thing he did with [*horn player*] Eric Leeds. I remember having to make my way back to Canada to do something for Canada Day, so I missed one of the TV show gigs, but the next one I made, and then we went back into rehearsals and worked on the show for months.

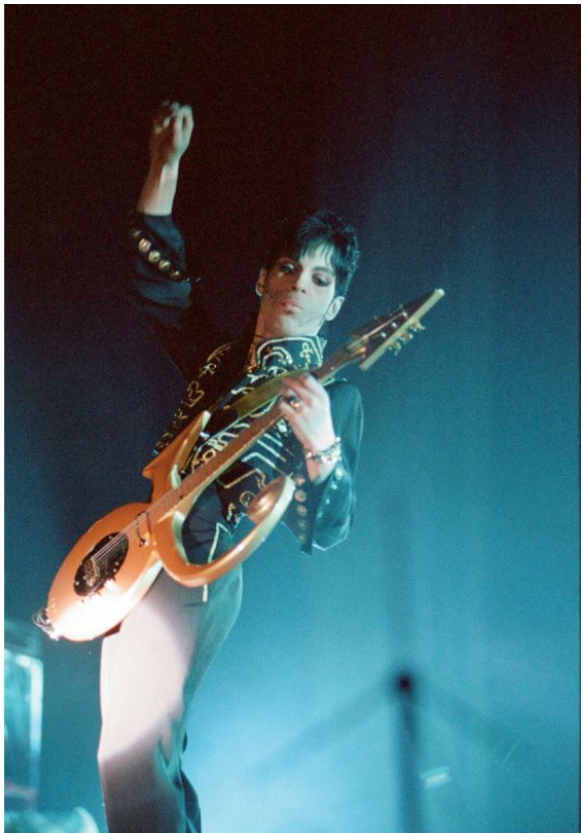
What can you tell us about your studio work at Paisley Park?

Well, other people know what I played more than me, because it was a constantly revolving thing. There was never any, "Okay, today is a studio day." It was just, "Let's go in. Let's stop here." We recorded just as Prince thought of it, and everybody was on call for everything all the time. I remember, we were messing around once in a rehearsal, and I was playing something on acoustic guitar, and the next thing I know, I'm in the studio. He says, "I like that pattern you're playing. Can you put it on this song?" And it turned into "Dreamin' About U" [*from* Emancipation]. It was me just practicing something on acoustic guitar to stretch my hands out. Sometimes we would rehearse 10 to 15 or more hours a day, and the nylon-string Godin was good for stretching my fingers on.

But Prince was always recording, although he didn't need me a lot, because he's a guitarist. One time, he called me in to put something on the song "The Love We Make." He had already done it as vocals and piano, and he said, "I like the way you voice that particular chord. Can you use that voicing on this?" But I would never know if it would make the cut as far as what he dug. I'm not completely sure, but I'm of the opinion that Prince was recording our rehearsals all the time — even the breaks when we were just noodling around — and there was something going on where he could hear what we were doing, even if he might not actually be there and we were just running through stuff with the guys. At Paisley, everything was live, and he could hear everything that was going on in all places.

Did you discuss gear with him very much?

Not really. When I first came there, he told me what he did not want us to play, and that was Fenders or Gibsons. I don't know what all that was about, because later he started playing them. I guess he had some situation, because he'd say, "They all want you to do something for nothing." At the time, Prince had a lot of rack stuff, and I was using a Rocktron Taboo Twin combo. It was programmable, but it looked very simple. I'd had all the Rocktron Intellifex stuff, so this was like taking the best parts of what they had and putting it into something small. Prince would look at my amp and then look at all his stuff, and he'd say to his tech, "Why can't I get that sound?" But I knew my gear, and I was already into sound modeling and pulling up tones, just learning on my own. I used my ears to shape whatever technical knowledge I could get, and I was always bugging amp makers and talking to people when I went to NAMM. I'm curious, so that's what I do. Prince would just say, "Go to NAMM and find something cool, and tell me about it!"



Wielding his original Love Symbol guitar, built by Jerry Auerswald from antique maple and painted gold, on the Ultimate Live Experience Tour, March 18, 1995

RICHARD NELMES/MIRRORPIX/GETTY IMAGES

Did he ever express interest in any of the guitars you played?

Not directly, but at the time I had a nylon-string Godin Multiac, which was a great guitar that had MIDI capabilities. He got a big kick out of that. I would mess around with altered tunings, because I'm a big fan of Joni Mitchell, and I would often leave the guitar on a stand when I left for the night. But when I would come back, it would be tuned standard, and I was always telling the tech not to retune it. One time, I got a call at three in the morning, and it was Prince's tech, and he asked if I had my guitar. I said, "Yeah, did somebody break into Paisley?" He said, "No, but can I

come over and get it?" I asked what for, and he said, "Well, Prince has been using it when you're gone." [*laughs*] So I asked Godin to send Prince a Multiac. But he still had trepidations and said, "Really, what do I have to do?" I told him to just play it: "I want to be able to take my guitar, so this is my gift to you!"

DONNA GRANTIS

After receiving an invitation to come to Paisley Park in 2012 to audition, Canadian session and touring guitarist Donna Grantis jammed a short list of tunes with Prince, bassist Ida Neilsen and drummer Hanna Welton for a project that would become the funk-rock trio 3rdEyegirl, After touring in the U.S., Europe and U.K., Prince & 3rdEyeGirl released *Plectrumelectrum*. From 2013 until Prince's death in 2016, Grantis remained a member of his supergroup, the New Power Generation.

What are some of the most important things you learned from working with Prince?

I learned a lot from him about funk guitar playing. I'd watch and listen intently as he demonstrated funk riffs he wanted me to play. I compiled those musical gems into a score titled "Funklopedia" for reference and personal study. In addition to expanding my vocabulary in the genre, I learned a lot about funk phrasing from Prince, in particular, how he approached playing certain parts of a phrase in an extremely staccato manner. He taught me to approach those notes as if they had "no value" rhythmically.



Prince & 3rdEyeGirl. (from left) Donna Grantis, Prince, Hannah Welton and Ida Kristine Nielsen

THE PRINCE ESTATE - PHOTOGRAPHER DERREL TODD

This, along with impeccable timing, tone and articulation contributes to how a musical idea can sound truly funky.

Did the experience affect your equipment choices?

Performing an expanding repertoire of funk-infused music with New Power Generation definitely impacted my gear choices. Instead of rocking my PRS CE22 through custom-modded Traynor Bass Master amps from the '70s, as I did with 3rdEyeGirl, I switched to using a PRS Mira Semi-Hollow through PRS Archon amps. Prince liked the percussive quality of semihollow guitars for funk, and I love the playability of a PRS neck, so the Mira was a perfect fit. In contrast to the fat, dark, vintage tone with buttery sustain that I enjoyed in 3rdEyeGirl, I needed a super crystal-clear clean tone to best complement our expanding repertoire of Prince hits. My pedals could shape the tone when needed, but most importantly, the clean tone had to sparkle. I dialed this in with the Archon by cranking the clean channel volume and adjusting the master volume to taste.

What were some of the highlights of recording *Plectrumelectrum*, and how did the experience impact your following solo release, *Diamonds & Dynamite*?

It was an amazing experience. Prince, bassist Ida Nielsen, drummer Hannah Welton and I were set up in a dance/choreography studio that also doubled as a basketball court in Paisley Park, with mics running to Studio A, where our performances were captured live to tape. We rehearsed there, performed for friends and recorded most of the album in that room. Some songs, like the title track, were recorded in one take. During the recording of "Whitecaps" and "Anotherlove," I remember Prince saying, "Call me when you have it!" and he left Hannah, Ida and I to record as a rhythm section while he played Ping-Pong. Sometimes we jammed on a groove, like the one in "Stopthistrain," and then discovered days later that it had been arranged into a structured song. We worked fast — I don't think we even played "Wow" all the way through a single time before the tape was rolling. This approach influenced how I produced my 2019 release, *Diamonds & Dynamite*. I recorded the album live to tape over two days in an effort to capture the authenticity and spirit of creative first instincts, a process I grew to appreciate during sessions with Prince. I value the challenge of striving for a collectively moving performance and the outcome created when a group of musicians freely interact in the moment. There's something very human and fearless behind that intent that I think translates musically in a special way.

LET'S WORK

Engineer Hans-Martin Buff recalls life as Paisley Park's studio boffin.

ACCLAIMED FREELANCE RECORDING engineer and producer Hans-Martin Buff began his career working as a studio tech at Paisley Park in 1995. He summarily became Prince's recording engineer and worked on the albums *The Gold Experience*, *Chaos and Disorder*, *Emancipation*, *The Vault: Old Friends 4 Sale* and *Rave Un2 the Joy Fantastic*.

"One of the reasons I got the gig with Prince is because I was young and I was hungry and I was kind of unformed," Buff says. "And Prince had a specific way of working. It was always, 'I have an idea that I want to put out. You help me capture it.' And that's kind of how it was. With a lot of people I work with these days, I offer sounds that help start the ideas for how a project is going to come together, but with Prince it was never that way. He had the idea, and he would react to good sounds and then have more ideas. The main thing that I did was to not let technology get in his way when he wanted to express himself. I think that was my main job. So part of the deal for me was to organize the place for his ideas and capture them in a comprehensive way."

You worked a lot with Prince one on one. What was that like?

I worked with him every day for four years, and most of the things I did was just him and maybe a guest, if he felt like it. Or they started from some kind of jam with the band or some group of people. When I started in '96, Kat Dyson was in the band, so she played on a lot of things on the album *Emancipation*, where I did a substantial part. And she also played on "The Truth," which is kind of a hidden gem that he stuck onto *Crystal Ball*. Kat played on that, and Mike Scott came in as well. I think as far as guitarists, that was it in my day, with the exception of his buddies like Lenny Kravitz or Larry Graham, who did a lot of the bass stuff. But even then, if Prince felt like he had something to say on the bass, he would do it.

Did he like to work quickly in the studio?

Yes, super fast. I've never seen that before or since. The one thing that's different from any other artist I worked with is that there was never that phase of, "How should I do this?" Even accomplished studio guitarists will have to figure out approaches, or noodle about for a while, but Prince never did. He just went for it. He took the guitar and he started recording. Sometimes, of course, he would play something wrong or at the wrong spot, but there was never any fumbling.



How much time would he spend getting sounds?

With guitars, he would take some time going through a whole song and trying out different things. But, like, with vocals, which for a recording engineer is always a huge thing, he would kick everybody out, including myself, and he'd record what he wanted to record. And the most elaborate arrangement wouldn't take longer than two hours. That's the longest he'd ever work on the background vocals and everything else. So he was super fast, because it was never about fucking it up. With Prince, it was always, "The first time is it." And if he didn't get it the first time, he would do another version. He wouldn't go back and question himself.

"THE WAY PRINCE WORKED, THE RECORDING WAS ACTUALLY THE ACT OF WRITING"
— HANS-MARTIN BUFF

Do you think Prince was able to conceptualize songs in their entirety?

Well, on "Greatest Romance Ever Sold" [*from* Rave], he came in with the finished lyrics, and at the end of the day that song was done. So it was pre-formed. But with most of the songs, he built them in the studio. He would start with a basic loop. If there was a Linn Drum — which, toward the end of my tenure, we brought out of the basement — he'd do it himself. But usually his drummer/programmer, Kirk Johnson, would program a couple of beats, and then he'd start playing guitar or a keyboard over it, and then he would do vocals and he'd flesh it out. The way Prince worked, the recording was actually the act of writing. — *AT*





BLUE MOODS

Julian Lage and his trio honor the Blue Note tradition with a spiritual offering for a troubled modern world.

BY RICHARD BIENSTOCK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

JULIAN LAGE HAS had a restless six-string spirit for practically his entire life. A guitar prodigy, he became professional at the age of seven and had performed with Carlos Santana, recorded with David Grisman and appeared on the Grammy Awards before he hit his teens.

As a player, Lage is deeply rooted in jazz technique and history but also equally adept at rock, pop, standards, classical, country, improvisational music and more. Since launching his solo career in 2009, the exploratory artist has released albums that find him playing in duo, trio, quartet and quintet configurations, in collaboration with musicians like Wilco's Nels Cline (2014's *Room*) and the Punch Brothers' Chris Eldridge (the same year's *Avalon*), or even centered around a specific guitar, be it a 1939 Martin OOO-18 (2015's *World's Fair*), a Fender Telecaster (2016's *Arclight*) or a 1956 Gretsch Duo Jet (2019's *Love Hurts*).

His newest record, *Squint*, sees the 33-year-old continuing his stylistic adventures with a



record that presents him in trio format with bassist Jorge Roeder and Bad Plus drummer Dave King. The album turns away from the shorter-form, pop-dominated content of its predecessor, *Love Hurts*, in favor of a looser and more improvisational approach that reveals the guitarist's love for early rock and blues, as well as songbook standards and jazz classics. And it's all tied together by Lage's reverence for, and recognition of, the history behind his new label, the legendary Blue Note Records, as well as an acknowledgement of the turbulent cultural moment in which the album was created.

Lage sat down with *Guitar Player* to discuss the making of *Squint*, and also went deep into his history as an improvisational guitarist. As for what continues to motivate him as an artist, he says, "I'm really interested in the evolution of the guitar. And I feel like I stand on the shoulders of giants in that respect. Anything I'm doing wouldn't exist without the people that came before me, and also without what my colleagues are doing now. So my music is a nod to that idea, and it also, hopefully, has a certain sense of inventiveness to it as well."

Lage laughs. "And sometimes maybe it's just an inventive way of nodding. But for whatever reason, that's the kind of thing that gets me excited."



Performing in Brooklyn, New York, September 22, 2016

MIREYA ACIENTO/GETTY IMAGES

This is your second record in a row with Jorge Roeder and Dave King. But whereas your previous effort together, *Love Hurts*, felt more structured, this one leans heavily on improvisation.

If we're talking about the way this particular trio metabolizes songs, you can't not look at the improvisational language and, even further than that, you can't not develop it and cultivate it and do things to substantiate the presence of improvisation. *Love Hurts* was a record we made after we had played, I think, three shows ever as a trio. So it captured a sense of excitement and freshness that was so wonderful. But over the couple of years of touring with this ensemble, we realized that the improvisational dynamic that we share is really not accidental. It's as considered as the songs in terms of the ways we solo and the freedom we like to present and the type of risks we like to take. That's the meat of the message.

Can you talk to us about the intention behind *Squint*?

I wanted to celebrate a couple of points. One of them being, here we are making a record for Blue Note. What does the music from the Blue Note tradition mean to me? A really big centerpiece of that question, or the answer to that question, is it's swing music played by bass, drums and a soloist. In the past I think I've looked more at combining early rock and roll with jazz or more folkloric or orchestral classical music, all



with a sense of improvisation. But this time it was, "Let's celebrate jazz music from an abstract modern perspective." Which is kind of another way of saying "Blue Note," right?

The second part of the answer would be to say that I wanted to make a record that shows the band as it has evolved, and in a way that hasn't been documented in the studio yet. And finally, another point about this record is that we made it during this critical time in human history — the pandemic obviously being a part of that, but also just the reckoning of social justice and systemic racism and gender inequality. So I think the temperament was, "Let's make music that in some respect honors that there's a lot of pain in the world and there's a lot of healing that needs to happen. And let's think of these songs as almost like a spiritual offering."

Several of your guitar passages on the album were improvised to speeches. What led you to do that, and how does improvising to the human voice influence your phrasing and your dynamics and your note choices when you translate that cadence to guitar?



I became really interested in, from a place of humility, playing music that I felt was respectful and sympathetic to, let's say, a lecture by James Baldwin or Nikki Giovanni, talking about leaders not just within the African-American community but leaders of humanity. And talking about the stuff that matters. And if that's their message, which in and of itself is essential and critical and impactful, how are they using speech to convey that? I started realizing that I wanted to build a strong relationship in my playing between what I want to say and how I say it. And that goes for playing with other people, too. You have to play something that supports what they're saying but also take into consideration the rhythms and the cadences. What kind of lines do you play? Do you dominate it with chords? Do you complement it with the upper register? It teaches you about using the guitar as an extension of your speaking voice.

"RECORDS FOR ME ARE AN EXCUSE TO GO DEEPER INTO SOMETHING THAT I WANT TO GO DEEPER INTO"

LOVE AT THE IMPROV

Julian Lage's four tips for embracing your inner improviser.



"IMPROVISATION IS THOUGHT of as something you can't cultivate," Julian Lage says. "And yet anyone who's an improviser and thinks of themselves that way understands that improvisation is one of the strictest musical territories." With that in mind, Lage sat down with *Guitar Player* to share a few great tips for incorporating improvisation into your playing.

STRATEGIZE BEFORE YOU MOBILIZE

"As a piece of advice, understand that you have permission to strategize as an improviser. And that doesn't necessarily mean working up a solo ahead of time. [*Famed jazz vibraphonist and composer*] Gary Burton used to talk about this: If someone says, 'Take a solo,' you're allowed to decide how you want it to go. For instance, you can decide how many choruses you're going to play. You don't have to just play until something bad happens and then you have to escape. [*laughs*] If you say, 'I want to play one chorus, not two,' you already have a leg up as an improviser because you have a chronological framework to work within. Then you can get down to the brass tacks of, 'What do I want to play?' Otherwise, not only do you have to play a solo you like but you also have to do it without knowing when it's going to end. And that's kind of like asking someone to get in a car and just saying, 'Drive. You'll know when to stop.'"

IMPROVISE WHAT YOU PLAY… AND ALSO WHAT YOU DON'T PLAY

"Improvisation is not synonymous with generating ideas. And I think people think that it is — to solo is to make up new content. And simply put, no. You can do that, and that's a feature of the craft, but improvisation might also be you saying, 'I'm just going to play the melody of this composition, and all I'm going to improvise is where I leave parts of the melody out.' So the improvisation becomes the things that you don't play. It's a subtractive form of improvisation. And there's a lot of great solos that are created in that image, right? Duke Ellington, Ben Webster — they're masters of omission."

LISTEN TO YOUR SURROUNDINGS

"The great improvisers that I've been around, their number-one thing is that when they start improvising, it is so obvious that they're also listening to everything I'm playing. Everything. So in a way, you can say the definition of improvisation is almost being interdependent: 'I'm going to listen to you so hard and get all my ideas from you and be connected to you.' It's very fun that way, because it means you can show up and say, 'The pressure's not all on me. I just have to know what questions to ask musically.'"

IMPROVISATION IS NOT JUST "WINGING IT"

"It's really important as an improviser to know when you're not actually being asked to improvise. If you're in a rock band and they say, 'Come up with a solo break that's awesome,' well, let's for a second suspend the notion that that's improvisation and think of it as you're being asked to be a composer. That's the way I think about George Harrison. Obviously, he and the Beatles were improvisers as humans and musicians, but you could also make the argument that George Harrison was one of the great arrangers, orchestrators and composers with his solos.

"And my experience is that the people who really call themselves 'improvisers' think about improvisation the way that people think about producing and composing. They're obsessed with it. There's obsessed with parameters. They're obsessed with limitations that inspire them to improvise stronger. Improvisation is a legitimate study." —*RB*

Another thing I'll say is there's something about speech and communication, the freedom of it, that I'm fascinated by. But then when it comes to tones and rhythms and pitches on the guitar, there's something that gets a little more conservative and a little more rational. So I wanted to marry my capacity as a communicator of language with my message on guitar.

Is there a particular spot you could point to on the record that is the result of your improvising to the human voice?
I think if you listen to "Familiar Flower" you get a good sense of that. There's a lot of variety — rhythmically, phrase-wise — in that song, where I'm changing tempos, I'm changing registers, and it's very conversational with the band. When I hear my playing on that song, it sounds more like how I speak. To a certain degree, "Short Form" has it, too.

Does improvisation ever lead to songwriting, or is it a completely separate discipline?
Well, on the new record, "Saint Rose" is an example of almost exactly that. That song was pretty much just an improvisation — the melody, the riff, everything. I was like, "Oh, that sounds good. I'll write it down. Now it's a song." So good, bad or different, I think what I was starting to understand was that just because it's improvised doesn't mean that it's not as legitimate a composition. It's so funny, because as someone who's been obsessed with improvisation since I was a little boy, I should know that. And yet I think there's an old-world paradigm of, "If it's written, it's real, and if it's not written, it's 'less than.'" But no one ever said that. I just kind of believed it. So it's about looking to improvisation as a legitimate form of composition.

What was your main gear setup on *Squint*?
My guitar was a Collings 470 JL [*Lage's signature model*]. We just made that guitar, and it's really cool. The pickups are by Ron Ellis and are in the tradition of Duosonic pickups, and we put it through a Magic Vibro Deluxe amp, which is basically like a black-panel Deluxe, and a tweed '59 Fender Champ at the same time. And then on a few tracks — "Day and Age," "Saint Rose," "Twilight Surfer" — I'm using an incredible 1955 Les Paul that I love. Otherwise there's a [*Strymon*] Flint pedal and a clean boost. But the Collings through those two amps is kind of the heartbeat of it. My sound is basically just a guitar turned up. [*laughs*]



Each of your records seems to have a distinct course, whether it's the size of the accompanying ensemble, the instruments you play or the style of music you approach. Is your intention to use the studio as a tool to explore your musical personality?
Well, that's a killer question. For me that's totally the point. Records for me are an excuse to go deeper into something that I want to go deeper into. It's a way of fortifying an aesthetic or an interest or a curiosity or a question. I think of it as kind of like, "If you can sort it out in record form, you're probably going to have to become a better player to do it." Do you know what I mean? Versus making a record that just tells people, "Oh, I do this thing natively." And I say this not as a "less than" proposition — it's an equally great proposition. It's a way of saying, "Here's this thing that I do and we need to capture it." And the records I make, I think they're at least partially that. But they're also partially, "What's the thing I would love to be able to do?" Once I figure that out, then that's what the record is going to be about.



BATTLE READY

With *The Battle at Garden's Gate*, Greta Van Fleet fight for rock's right to evolve. **Jake Kiszka** leads the charge.

BY RICHARD BIENSTOCK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

WHEN GRETA VAN FLEET first exploded onto the scene a few years back, the band was lauded as much for its riff-centric, groove-heavy approach to rock and roll — something of a rarity in this day and age — as it was scrutinized for its stylistic adherence to rock icons like Led Zeppelin.

Early hits like "Highway Tune" and "Safari Song" certainly traded on blues-drenched boogie riffage, crashing rhythms and gloriously histrionic vocals. But on releases like the 2017 EPs *Black Smoke Rising* and *From the Fires*, as well as their 2018 debut full-length, *Anthem of the Peaceful Army*, the young quartet from Frankenmuth, Michigan, demonstrated that it was more than a mere arena-rock retread, stretching out into pastoral, folky meanderings, proggy epics, country-tinged jams and dark-hued, metal-adjacent workouts, among numerous other styles.

Even so, nothing in Greta Van Fleet's short past could prepare listeners for the new *The Battle at Garden's Gate* (Republic). It's a sprawling and challenging collection of tunes that for the most part leaves behind the upbeat, uptempo hard rock of previous releases in favor of a darker, denser and overall deeper experience. "There's a lot of beauty in the album, and there's a lot of savagery

in there, too," says guitarist Jake Kiszka, who plays in the group with his brothers Josh (vocals) and Sam (bass) and drummer Danny Wagner.

Beauty and savagery do abound, from the slow-burning opener, "Heat Above," which unfurls in a swirl of acoustic and electric guitars, keyboards and strings (the band has called it "a dream in the clouds") to the doomy and turbulent first single, "Age of Machine." Then there's the massive, almost nine-minute closer, "The Weight of Dreams," which climaxes with a breathtaking extended lead guitar freak-out. Throughout its dozen songs, *The Battle at Garden's Gate* shows Greta Van Fleet swinging for the sonic fences at every turn, and in the process hitting more than a few out of the park. According to Kiszka, that musical ambition is baked into the Greta Van Fleet mindset. "The rules are just a framework," he says about adhering to rock-and-roll traditions. "You have to break them in order to create what doesn't already exist."

Kiszka recently sat down with *Guitar Player* to discuss Greta Van Fleet's rule-breaking new album, as well as the future of rock and roll in general and, more specifically, the guitar as a means of expression within the genre. "I think what's going on now is there's a lot of invention and experimentation," he says. "And that's really important to the new form of rock and roll and its evolution and survival for our generation and the next generation."

As for the guitar? "People are still so fascinated by it," he continues. "I know I certainly am."

In terms of songwriting and sound, *The Battle at Garden's Gate* is very different from the group's debut album and its two earlier EPs. I'd imagine this is due at least in part to the fact that the new songs were conceived largely on the road, during your last few years touring the world. Whereas earlier songs like, say, "Highway Tune," were written in your parents' garage. Suffice to say, your day-to-day experiences must have changed greatly.



Jake Kiszka with his 1961 Gibson Les Paul





Fleet foxes. (from left) Jake, Josh Kiszka, Sam Kiszka and Danny Wagner

Oh, yeah. I suppose it's a reflection of a lot of the experiential aspects of what goes down on the road — the different places, people and cultures we've seen in and around the world on tour. Because you're right, I think we were a garage rock and roll band to a certain degree at the beginning, whereas *The Battle at Garden's Gate* is a different way of making music in the capacity that we do as a band, together. It's definitely approaching songwriting from a different angle, and there are a lot of experiences that informed the music.

Can you point to anything in particular that was exceptionally eye opening?

Maybe some of the things we saw in South America, where we'd get offstage and grab something to eat after the show. People would be cleaning up the venue, and there would be beer cups and leftover food on the ground, and somebody sweeping the floor would pick up a piece of food and put it in their pocket. You see that and it saddens you. Some of those elements come through on the album.

But when you're listening to the album as a whole and you admire it as a full body of work, I think what's being represented is that there is still a lot of hope in the world. We've seen so much great positivity and peace. But then, on the other hand, there's also a lot of poverty, a lot of starvation and a lot of things that I think society needs to have a sense of reformation about. And if you consider that an artist has a role of holding up a mirror to society, then it was important to us to speak about some of these experiences.

Looking at the record from a musical perspective, the sound is very hard hitting, but it's not as much of an immediate listen as some of your past work. It's not just big riffs, big choruses and big solos; you have to be drawn in over repeated listens. Did that shift in temperament require you to alter your guitar approach? It seems as if you're using your instrument more to color the songs as opposed to always being the primary driver.

I did want to approach the guitar on this album in a certain way, and I think you're right: It is almost like painting with colors. I wanted a bit more intricacy, a bit more depth and a bit more nuance. Some of the tracks are riff-driven and hard hitting and are contextually very much that type of song. But then on some of the other songs — like "The Barbarians" or "The Weight of Dreams" or "Trip the Light Fantastic" — there's a bit more intimacy, I suppose, and they're characterized by a particular technicality in the approach. Sometimes my objective there was intentional, and sometimes the song really just called for it. "Broken Bells" is another good example, or "Tears of Rain." These were songs that were about capturing a type of intimacy that required a different approach to songwriting.

> "GUITAR'S SURVIVAL IS MORE PROOF THAT ROCK AND ROLL ISN'T DEAD"

One track that harks back to the more driving, riff-centric approach that we think of as the traditional Greta Van Fleet sound is the first single, "My Way, Soon." I love the guitar tone on that one. It's dirty and aggressive, but it also has a lot of definition and almost a "twanginess" to it.

On this record, I really focused on the nuances in my playing, and I think "My Way, Soon" is a good example of that. It's a sort of highly detailed approach, in which you take something simple and add a more complex layer to it. As for the "twanginess" that you mention — I think it's interesting you say that, because it probably has more to do with the technique than the tone. Something similar would be "Highway Tune," which has a twangy type of riff as well — the hammer-ons and pull-offs and the articulation of the playing. But, in general, we were doing a lot of different things sonically this time. We had basically a month, month and a half in L.A. in the summer of 2019 to really craft this record and to be particular about tonality and about what equipment we were using. We had time to work it out.

What was your main gear setup this time around?

We had so much stuff flying around when we made this album. As far as amps go, I always have a Marshall Astoria and a Bletchley with me. Bletchley is a boutique amp company out of Detroit. When we were recording there early on and kind of getting our legs under us, the owner, Daniel [*Russell*], gave me an amp, and I've used it ever since. So I always have those two amps when I'm in the studio.

I also had a '60s Fender Champ, and Greg Kurstin, our producer, brought his Fender Champ into the studio as well, and we were using those in stereo a lot. We'd put them on opposite sides of the room and mic them, and we'd get some really interesting, really wide sounds. And there was also a Gibson Falcon, and a Vox AC30, which I always have in the studio because it comes in handy for cleaner tones.



Also, a lot of the solos went through either a tweed Fender Deluxe or a '65 Fender Deluxe Reverb that belonged to our engineer. And we used a [*Roland*] Space Echo on some of the solos, like on "Built by Nations" and "Broken Bells," and then panned it manually, so you hear it flying all around. There was a lot of experimentation.

How about guitars?

The main guitar, the workhorse, I suppose, was my '61 Les Paul. I also used a blond '62 Fender Telecaster, and I don't think I've ever used a Tele on previous recordings. But I used it a lot for overdubs this time. And then I had a '60s sunburst Stratocaster, which was interesting, because I was looking for a guitar with a whammy bar that we could pan in stereo, and Greg Kurstin said, "Well, I had this Stratocaster, but I gave it to my friend's son." So the kid came in and brought the guitar with him, and we let him sit there while we recorded with it. We put it on the song "The Barbarians." You can hear it in the middle solo section. Then I remember there was an Epiphone Casino, which is on the "Built By Nations" solo. I like the Casino because the neck is really thin, which is very much like that '61 Gibson that I like.

There's a certain amount of rock traditionalism in Greta Van Fleet's approach. At the same time, as we've been discussing, you really push the



boundaries of your creativity on *The Battle at Garden's Gate*. Looking at rock and roll in 2021, how do you strike that balance where you're retaining a connection to earlier sounds but also staying modern and forward-thinking?
I think this is a really interesting thing to consider. What is the newest forum of contemporary rock and roll? Where does it stand as a genre and how is it affected by the musicians involved? People say that rock and roll is a minority, and I'm sure it is. But it can cut through concrete when it needs to, especially because it is such a minority. And there are so many great contemporary rock and roll bands. You have the White Stripes, who were path pavers, and then everything that came after them, like Gary Clark, Jr., the Black Keys, Cage the Elephant, Alt-J and Aaron Lee Tasjan, and then Ida Mae, Goodbye June, the Struts, Dirty Honey, us in a sense. We're all kind of in this orb of rock creation and evolution to a certain degree. All you can do is take the traditional aspects of songwriting and the instrument in your hands — and in this case, we're talking about the guitar — and learn the rules and then break them and restructure them.

How would you extend that idea to your approach on the guitar?
What's interesting about the guitar is that it represents practically the entire genre of rock and roll. Which is fascinating. But at heart it's a tool for creating. And it's a tactile thing that involves your fingers, but also your heart and mind. As far as moving forward with it, one thing that inspires me is technology. There's so much new technology being incorporated into guitar playing. Take a song on the new album like "Trip the Light Fantastic," where there's a Mellotron pedal, a [*Electro-Harmonix*] MEL9, that is incorporated into the guitar's tonality. It's quite a unique sound and something that I've never heard before. So part of it is about guitar players stretching the realm of capability and looking at what's possible with new technology or new guitars or new concepts, and just thinking outside the box of traditional thought.

"AS A FORM OF EXPRESSION, THE GUITAR IS MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT. SO WHATEVER YOU'RE DOING WITH IT, JUST KEEP GOING"

In addition to artists working within rock and roll and other styles, there are so many great guitarists that live in the digital world — i.e., YouTube, Instagram and other social-media platforms. How do you view all the different ways the guitar is utilized today?
I think there's a place for all of that in the world. And it's sort of a reaffirmation that the guitar is still such a classic and important staple of modern society. By extension, you could say that guitar's survival is more proof that rock and roll isn't dead. Even with these guitar players on Instagram, YouTube and TikTok who may just do a very specific thing — the people watching them are going to go back and look at the guitar players that predated them, and that will influence many guitarists of our generation and the next, who will start writing their own songs on guitar.

For that matter, you have groups like the Foo Fighters and Arctic Monkeys, and even the classic rockers like the Who and the Rolling Stones, who will still go out and play three-hour concerts that showcase the guitar. It just shows that the guitar has survived in such an interesting way.

What advice would you give to a young guitarist starting out in rock and roll?
I think that persistence and dedication and timing will get you anywhere. If I could say something to my younger self when I was first playing guitar, I would say that. And I would add that you should just continue with your craft, because, as I've gotten older and have become a more proficient player, I've realized that I've become able to speak through the instrument better. And it has become an outlet that has guided me, not even just musically or instrumentally but also in my personal life. It's always been an outlet, whether I'm ever down or up. As a form of expression, the guitar is mind, body and spirit. So whatever you're doing with it, just keep going.

BLUES BROTHER

As **Steve Cropper** returns with his "first proper solo album," the Hall of Famer reflects on his long and remarkable role in the Stax family and beyond.

BY ELLIOT STEPHEN COHEN



Steve Cropper with his custom Peavey Telecaster copy and Fender Twin "Red Knob"



WILL IRELAND





Booker T. and the MGs in 1968. (from left) Steve Cropper, Al Jackson Jr., Donald "Duck" Dunn and Booker T. Jones

FOR THE PAST 60-plus years, Steve Cropper has maintained a legendary behind–the–scenes career as a musician, arranger, producer, songwriter and composer for movies and television shows. That said, the average casual music fan might only recognize his name from Sam Moore's calling out just three words on Sam and Dave's 1967 classic, "Soul Man": "Play it, Steve!"

"Well, it's like everything else that's happened in my life," Cropper says with a laugh. "I accept it with a grain of salt."

He was born Steven Lee Cropper, October 21, 1941, in the small town of Willow Springs, Missouri. However, the Rock and Roll Hall of Famer has his own pet name for the state.

"I call it 'misery' because I grew up on a farm," he explains. "Most of my friends and relatives don't like me calling it that, but if you've ever chopped corn or spent a whole day filling up a big old gunny sack with beans for a nickel, that was not my idea of fun. Those were the first times I started getting calluses on my hands. Of course, now, after all these years of playing guitar, you could probably shove an ice pick in mine and I wouldn't even feel it. When I come off the road, though, and it's too long between shows, my calluses will just peel off until I start playing again."

"I'M GLAD I DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH PRODUCING *REVOLVER*. I'D HAVE CHANGED IT, AND PROBABLY FOR THE WORSE"

Cropper's initial fascination with guitars goes back to when he was around nine years old in the early '50s. As he recalls, "The first one I ever plucked belonged to my Uncle Dale Uhlman. I was fascinated by it and would take it out of the closet and pluck it like someone would pluck a rubber band, just to feel the vibrations. Years later, I heard Les Paul and Chet Atkins for the first time, but realized I could never be that good."

After the first rock-and-roll explosion hit, in the mid '50s, Cropper became infatuated with guitarists like Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry. He acquired his first guitar by saving money from odd jobs, like setting up pins in a bowling alley, and receiving a little additional help from his parents. "It was one of those Sears Silvertone country sunbursts with a hole in the middle, like a flattop, and the cost was exactly $17. Or so I thought," he says, laughing. "I was sitting on the porch for hours, waiting for the delivery truck to turn the corner. When it finally arrived, the guitar was packed in a plain cardboard box — no case — and the driver says to me, 'That will be a 25 cents delivery charge' — which I didn't have. I said, 'What?!' So I ran into the house and my mom pulled a quarter from her purse. She always liked to tell people, 'If I'd never have given Steve that quarter, he would have never become a guitar player.' And she might have been right!"

That $17 dollar investment, of course, paved the way for a very special career that's still flourishing, 64 years later. It initially took off in 1961, when Cropper's high school band, the Mar-Keys, made the national record charts with the novelty instrumental hit "Last Night." The following year, Cropper teamed up with Hammond organist Booker T. Jones, drummer Al Jackson and bass player Louis Steinberg (who was replaced by Duck Dunn three years later) in a new group they named Booker T. and the MGs. As the first prominent interracial rock band, they enjoyed success with such Top 40 hits as "Green Onions," "Hip Hug-Her" and "Time Is Tight." But they were also the





LEFT: Booker T. & the MGs perform at Hunter College, New York City, January 21, 1967. ABOVE: Rehearsing at Stax with Pop Staples and the Staples Singers, December 20, 1968. BELOW: At Hunter College

house band for the Stax record label and performed on hundreds of sessions for such prominent artists as Otis Redding, Albert King and Wilson Pickett, before disbanding in 1970.

At 79, Cropper is as busy as ever, adding his famed guitar licks to the latest albums by Paul Simon, Ringo Starr and Buddy Guy. He's also coming out with a new CD, *Fire It Up* (Mascot Label Group), which features guest stars that include former Rascals leader Felix Cavaliere, singer Roger C. Reale, and drummers Simon Kirke (Bad Company), Chester Thompson (Genesis) and Anton Fig (Paul Shaffer and the World's Most Dangerous Band). Cropper calls it "my first proper solo album in more than 50 years."

How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact the methods you used to record this new album?

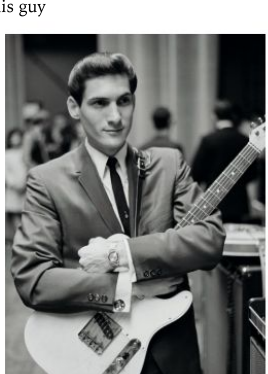
This is actually the fourth album I've co-produced with Jon Tiven. Normally, we would work together in person, but because of the pandemic, all of us had to work separately. On our earlier albums, Jon would be present for the mixes. This time, he stayed at home but still had everything worked out in advance. I just overdubbed my parts on my own, doing the basic rhythm tracks and then overdubbing some solos and some licks. We did have a lot of guest artists on the last album we did together, but this time I wanted to keep that to a minimum. There were different drummers, though, on some of the tracks. We would record to a loop and then replace it with a real drummer. I never did get to meet Mickey Curry or Simon Kirke, but overall, everything on the album worked out fine.

Technology has obviously changed greatly since you first started recording at Stax. What are some of the pros and cons between the way you used to record and the way albums are made now, where everyone just basically records their own parts separately? Do you miss the live give-and-take interaction of playing with other musicians?

I've been away from technology for a long time, and I've really let it pass me by, so I've had to surround myself with people who are really good with it. I do a lot of overdubs. People want me to play on their records, so they send me .WAV files, which go right into Pro Tools, and it usually works out pretty good. My engineer will look for the best take to use. The only problem is you have to remember what you did a few days ago. When we used to have only four tracks, you didn't have to remember that much.

How did Roger C. Reale get to do all the singing on the album?

Because of the pandemic, Roger didn't want to come to the studio to do any of his parts there. So I've never met him either, but the first time Jon sent me a recording of his voice, I said, "Where was this guy when I needed him 40 years ago? How come I don't know about him? Does he always sing with this kind of passion?" There are only two other singers that I've worked with in my production lifetime who were like that. One was Otis Redding, who sang every song like it was the last song he was ever going to sing. The other guy's name was Rod Stewart, who did the same. It didn't matter if Rod missed a lyric. Whenever he came into the studio to record, he always made sure to give his best performance to get the same from the musicians.

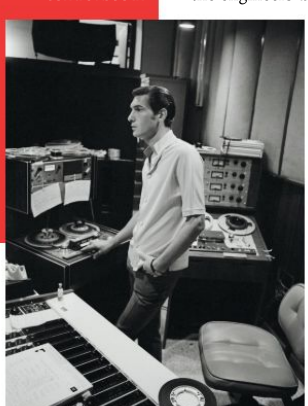


What was your main guitar on the album?

DON PAULSEN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (ALL PHOTOS)



ABOVE: Performing on the Stax Records *Gettin' It All Together* TV special in New York City, March 20, 1969. BELOW: In the Stax Records control booth



It's made by Peavey, but it's basically a Telecaster copy, except the headstock is different than a Fender. For seven years we had the [*Peavey*] Cropper Classic, but this one is different. It's more like the Wolfgang, but it's not a dead ringer. It has three tuning pegs on the top and three on the bottom, where Fender's has six in a row. That's one of the basic differences. The other is that I used to play a Telecaster straight up, using both pickups. It just seemed to work better because it took all of the brittleness out if I played it wide open. Onstage, I will do the little finger-volume thing to adjust my level, but on the sessions I just let the engineers decide what it should be.

On the album, do you use any special effects with your guitar?
No, but when I was with Booker T. years ago, I used tremolo a lot. I'm a one-sound-at-a-time guy. Very limited. All I'll do now is use a little tremolo once in awhile.

All of B.B. King's effects were in his left hand, and that worked out well.
There are tons of guitar players out there that imitate what B.B. King did, what is known as "The Shake." I could never move like that.

What do you find so special about the Telecaster that you've made it your signature guitar?
Well, first of all, if you hit a chord on a Gibson, it's going to distort, and the engineers have to do a lot of mixing to clean it up. If you do the same thing on a Telecaster, it won't do that. If I was a solo artist, though, I'd probably play a Les Paul, because the notes just sustain better. But with the right gear, you can make a Strat do the same thing. The Strat also bites a little more than a Les Paul does. I actually started out with a Gibson, as have a lot of people who play blues or jazz. It's a warmer sound and you can bend the strings easier, but overall in the studio a lot of producers and engineers prefer a Tele, because if you play a backbeat — what we used to call "chinks" — it would strengthen the snare drum. If you hit it dead on, it would really make it sound big.

Did you have a preferred amp for this album?
Yes, it was the Victoria 80212, modeled after the Fender Twin. It has a tweed covering, and it's all handmade, even the vacuum tubes. Since '91 though, onstage I've been using the Fender Twin "Red Knob," but the sound is too bright and brittle for recording. When I was at Stax, my regular amps were either a Fender Harvard or a Super Reverb.

Let's talk a little about Steve Cropper's musical history. Living in Memphis at age 15 in 1956, when Elvis became an overnight sensation, was he a role model in any way?
Like a lot of kids my age, I tried combing my hair and dressing like him. Elvis originally lived about two blocks from me before moving to Graceland. In the

DON PAULSEN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES







CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: With Otis Redding, Hunter College, New York City, January 21, 1967. With Neil Young, August 24, 1993. Onstage with the Blues Brothers' Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi at the Palladium, New York City, June 1, 1980

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (REDDING); EBET ROBERTS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (YOUNG, BLUES BROTHERS)

12th grade, I got to go there a few times and hang around, because some of his bodyguards were dating some of our seniors. I remember this one time Elvis was standing on the top of the staircase, staring right down at me and probably thinking, What are this snot-nosed kid and his friends doing in my living room? I'm going to go to jail for this! [*laughs*] So, of course, we stayed pretty quiet and out of his way.

As far as Elvis being a musical influence, I was more into people like Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, and the "5" Royales, whose guitar player, Lowman Pauling, was one of my heroes. I did a whole tribute album to him a few years ago. But Elvis did sing and play R&B-rooted ethnic music, and he really did a pretty good job of it.

> "ELVIS ORIGINALLY LIVED ABOUT TWO BLOCKS FROM ME BEFORE MOVING TO GRACELAND"

Was hearing James Burton's Telecaster-infused solos on those great early Ricky Nelson records like "Believe What You Say" and "Waitin' in School" an influence on you?

I didn't know it was James back then, because session guys weren't credited. But yeah, those were great records. I didn't get to meet James until '65, when Booker T. and the MGs were on the *Shindig* television show and he was part of the house band, the Shindogs. He and I have total respect for each other.

You were instrumental in convincing Bobby Whitlock to go visit Eric Clapton in England back in '69, which of course led to the formation of Derek and the Dominos.

The reason I sent Bobby a plane ticket to Eric's was because I couldn't do anything with him at Stax. He said, "How come?" I said, "Because you're a blue-eyed soul singer!" [*laughs*] I had the same problem with an album I produced for Mitch Ryder. The ethnic DJs at the time wouldn't play a White artist, which I fully understood, so I was caught in the middle.

In 1966, the Beatles were considering coming to Memphis to record with you at Stax, but that never materialized.

Yes, they were definitely interested, but what happened was Brian [*Epstein, the Beatles' manager*] came without them to Memphis to check things out, and he felt security wouldn't be good enough, so I never did get to work with the Beatles. After I heard the album, which was *Revolver*, I said, "I'm sure glad I didn't have anything to do with producing it, because I'd have changed it, and probably for the worse." [*laughs*] Later on, I did get to work with Ringo a couple of times and John Lennon on his *Rock 'n' Roll* album in the '70s.





ABOVE: Onstage at Bishopstock Music Festival, U.K., August 25, 2001. RIGHT: With Eddie Floyd, at Nashville's Bridgestone Arena, November 18, 2018

You've also enjoyed a lot of success as a songwriter. Songs like "Knock on Wood," "(In the) Midnight Hour" and "(Sittin' on) The Dock of the Bay" are still being played all these years later. How did "Knock on Wood" with Eddie Floyd come about?

Back in '66, I met Eddie at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis [*the site of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination two years later*]. I opened the door of his room, and right away Eddie says, "I have a great idea for a song. It's about superstitions." So we started coming up with every one we could think of: black cats, walking under ladders, opening umbrellas indoors, throwing a glass over your shoulder... Then I finally said to Eddie, "What do people do for good luck?" and right away he starts knocking on the edge of his chair. I said, "That's it. There's our song!"

"(Sittin' on) The Dock of the Bay" must have a lot of bittersweet memories for you, because Otis Redding died before knowing what a big hit it would become.

Yes, that's true. One day, Otis called me on the phone and said, "I've got a sure hit, but I need you to help me finish it." So after he met me at the studio and played me the first part, I wound up helping him finish one of the verses and also wrote the bridge and the changes, but we both felt it was still too raw. I said, "If we put strings on it, that will kill it," and he agreed. I was getting ready to produce the Staples Singers, and Otis thought having them on the record was a great idea. Before he left that day, he poked his head in the control room and said, "I'll see you on Monday," but, sadly, he died just a few days later. Before the record was released, I added a few guitar licks but still felt something was missing. That's when I came up with the idea of adding the sounds of crashing waves and seagulls.

What memories do you have of working with John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd as part of the Blues Brothers?

When some of my musician friends first heard that I was planning to work with them, they said, "What are you and Duck doing playing with those stupid comedians?" That all changed as soon as anyone saw us perform together. Belushi was a terrific singer, and Aykroyd played a mean blues harmonica. Of course it's well known that John had a major problem with drugs and alcohol. For the year and half that Duck and I toured with him, we tried our best to keep him sober and away from the drugs, but he wouldn't stop until the drugs ultimately killed him.

> "I SENT BOBBY A PLANE TICKET TO ERIC CLAPTON'S BECAUSE I COULDN'T DO ANYTHING WITH HIM AT STAX"

In your long career, what has been most memorable or rewarding?

It's really hard to say, but for me some of my fondest memories are from when I've collaborated with someone on a song, and then hearing it being played on the radio for the first time. That was always as exciting as the first time my dad took me to the park.

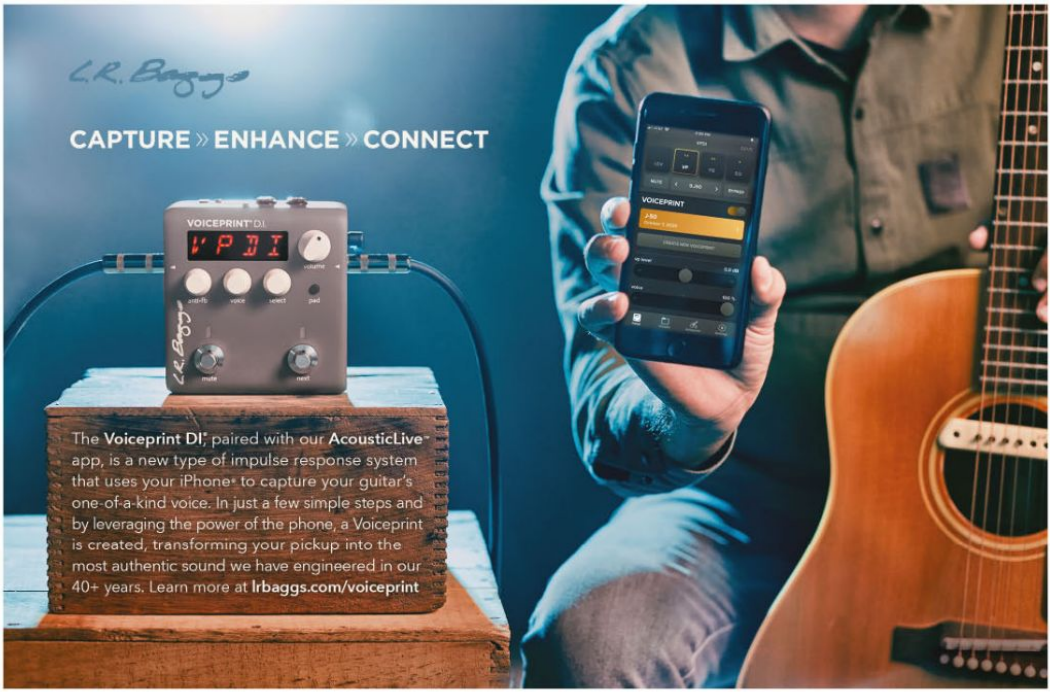
With your 80th birthday coming up later this year, do you still have any unfulfilled ambitions?

A reporter once asked me, "Steve, what's on your bucket list?" I said, "Just trying not to kick it!" I know I'm getting old and everyone dies, but I want to keep a young attitude as long as I can.

So what epitaph would you want written on your gravestone?

I think "Play it, Steve," would be good. I'll have to tell my wife to make sure not to forget that. [*laughs*]

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES (BISHOPSTOCK); ED ROBE/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE SCOTT HAMILTON CARES FOUNDATION (FLOYD)


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RECONSTRUCTED CLASSICS

On *Covered Tracks*, bayou bluesman **Eric Johanson** reinterprets rockers with acoustic guitars and looping technology.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KAYLIE McCARTHY



NEW ORLEANS CULTURE is built on real live musicians whooping it up together, so the pandemic shut down has been particularly challenging for cats in the 504 area code. Eric Johanson, known mostly as an electric whiz with a sweet slide game, got his big break being discovered by Louisiana blues guru Tab Benoit. He produced Johanson's 2017 debut, *Burn It Down*, for his label, Whiskey Bayou, and Johanson was an integral part of Benoit's Whiskey Bayou Revue rave-ups. Luther Dickinson produced Johanson's raucous *Below Sea Level* album, released in September 2020 on Nola Blue. With the Crescent City shuttered and little touring action, Johanson wasn't able to fully maximize his upward momentum, but he didn't lose it all either because, unlike a lot of roots players unwilling to tamper with technology beyond a tube amp, he assembled an above-average live-streaming rig and kept his roll going online with weekly acoustic performances. He played cover versions of anything he ever loved, regardless of genre. Fans started sending him requests, and he ultimately conjured a considerable catalog of stripped-down, loop-based arrangements. He built on that approach in his home recording studio, developing a fascinating method to avoid vibe-killing click tracks in favor of organic scratch-guitar loops triggering drum tones.

That in turn led Johanson to record two albums, cleverly titled *Covered Tracks: Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*. The style is singer-songwriter, rather than a shred show, but he does drop a gang of fantastic acoustic and electric leads, and his slide work on resonator is particularly noteworthy. Johanson doesn't over-sing like a lot of blues dudes, and his delivery is even more laid back in this setting. *Covered Tracks* is easy on the ears and a great way to enjoy new versions of old southern-rock favorites like "Midnight Rider" or "Can't You See," as well as classic Delta-style cuts by Mississippi Fred McDowell and John Hurt. That said, it's most interesting to hear the up-and-coming bluesman's takes on the popular artists of his adolescence, such as Soundgarden and Fiona Apple. Johanson's resonator rendition of Nine Inch Nails' "Head Like a Hole," which is the single from the first volume of *Covered Tracks*, is bound to inspire plenty of acoustic players to take a shot at it.

How'd you wind up reworking rockers such as "Head Like a Hole"?

I wanted to tie together all the different things that I've been into over the years, including re-interpreting music. I was a big Nine Inch Nails fan, and I felt the core of "Head Like a Hole" could be presented in a different way and still work well as a song. My version reflects my general approach to doing covers in that I didn't try to mimic every little sound or moment. I went off of my recollection and just started playing what came out. For example, the main riff in the original is a synthesizer bass line, and it's an exotic scale. I skipped the most dissonant stuff and made my own interpretation with a blues scale. So it's got some of the original vibe, but simplified.

The blues is about feeling, not re-creating a certain sequence of notes. Working from memory was a natural



way of bringing things I was into in the past to where I'm at now. Tab Benoit works the same way when he covers a song. He'll bring in a lyric sheet and make up his own version of the music. The difference is the natural embellishment that happens when he plays a song his way with the original lyrics. That's the way blues music was handed down from generation to generation before recording technology.

On that note, can you detail how you conjured your cuts from the ground up?

I recorded into Pro Tools, but I didn't want to use a click track, because something in the feel gets lost when I try tempo mapping to a digital grid. It's like being held back. When I livestream, I'll start by scratching out a rhythm on the strings using either a pick or my fingernails, depending on the plucking attack for the tune. I loop that using an Electro-Harmonix 22500. It has two channels, and I run a Radial Twin City ABY pedal in front of it. That way I'm able to record the scratch rhythm bed and then switch to the other channel, so my direct guitar is on a separate track from the loop. For recording, I use the loop instead of a click track. I use XLN Audio's Addictive Trigger, which allows me to pick a point in the loop that I feel is best for triggering an organic kick drum sound. To fill out the percussion, I did some handclaps and even used a can of cookie sprinkles as a shaker. That's all low in the mix, but you can definitely feel the thump of the kick drum, which gives the recording a sense of gravitas without getting in the way of the guitars.

"THE BLUES IS ABOUT FEELING, NOT RE-CREATING A CERTAIN SEQUENCE OF NOTES"



What acoustic guitars did you use, and how did you track them?

I only used two acoustics for all the tunes on both volumes of *Covered Tracks*. One is a relatively recent National Collegian resonator heard on "Head Like a Hole." The other is a Taylor 314 Grand Auditorium, which is the rhythm and lead instrument on the first track, "25 or 6 to 4." My recording method was similar for both. I set up a large-diaphragm condenser to capture vocals and guitar simultaneously. I get a better vibe if I sing and play together. I place a Shure Beta 57 close on the guitar and run a direct signal from the pickup. Sometimes I'll use a clean amp plug-in to help color that signal. Then I'll place it off to one side where it helps spread the stereo field and highlight different parts than the mic. The Taylor is a typical steel-string that I tune standard, so it's a totally different sound from the resonator, which I generally tune to open D. From strings six to one its D A D F# A D. The 314 has Taylor's onboard Expression System, which is also very different from the National Slimline magnetic pickup I use for the resonator. Between the two of them, I'm able to cover a lot of sonic ground. For live streaming, I'll use one or the other and stick to it for a whole song, but in the studio I was able to mix and match them to create more sonic variation.

"PEOPLE COME DOWN HERE TO PARTY, SO WE COULDN'T EVEN HAVE OUTDOOR MUSIC FOR A WHILE"

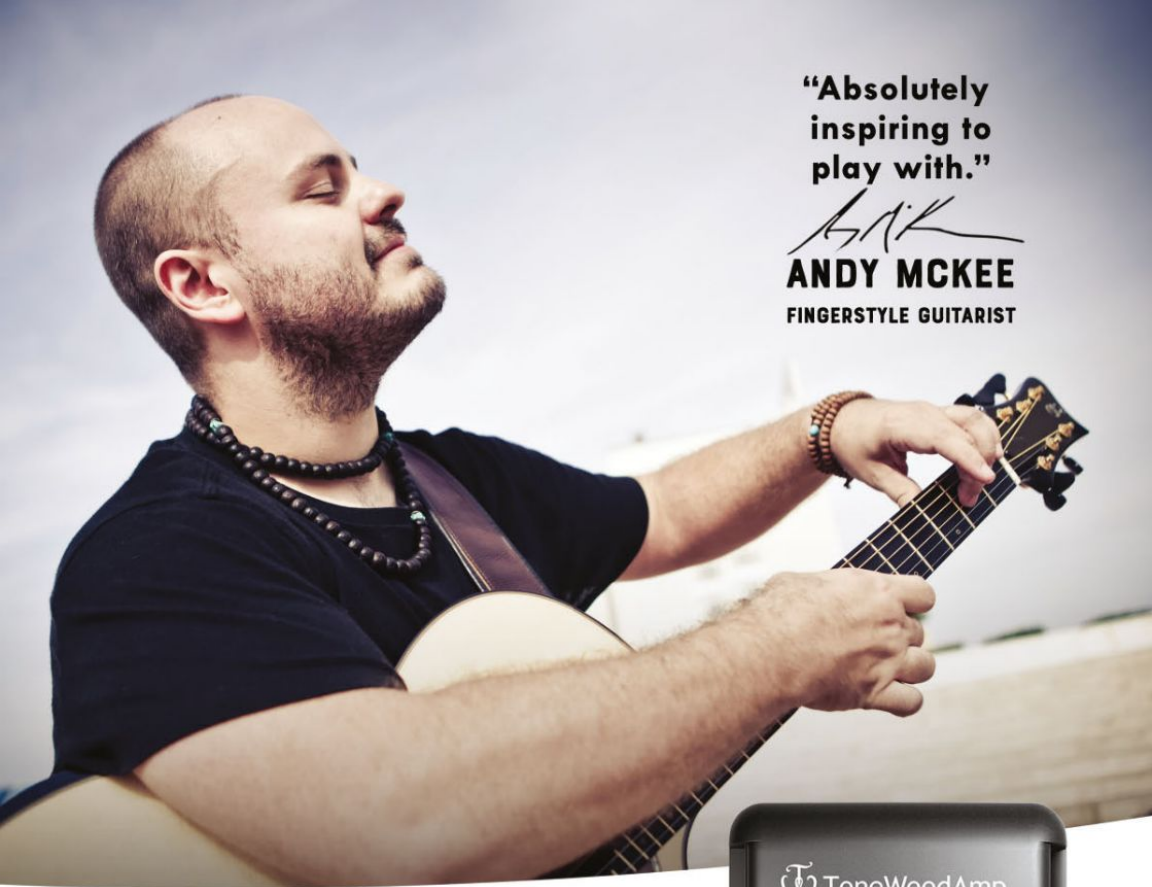
"Lovin' in My Baby's Eyes" is a good example and a heartfelt track from Taj Mahal's 1996 album *Phantom Blues*. What inspired you to cover that one?

He's such a unique artist, and that song in particular just hits me. I've heard him sing it live with my lady by my side, and I really felt it. I didn't trigger the bass drum on that one. I just left the scratch guitar as the rhythm bed. My version is in the same key as his. I played the rhythm on the Taylor in standard. The tune is in the key of B, played with a capo at the fourth fret out of a G chord position. I played the solo on the National.

Do you have a different approach for playing electric slide versus acoustic?

I find that a metal slide sings better on acoustic strings. Lately I've been using a MagSlide, which is very lightweight because it's made of magnesium. I tend to pluck more aggressively when playing acoustic slide to compensate for the fact that notes don't sustain as long. I use heavy strings starting at gauge .013 to get as much string energy going as possible. The main differences in my electric slide approach are that I use standard tuning and play a Dunlop 212 Pyrex, which is basically glass. It's short, which is important for playing slide in standard tuning where you can only focus on a maximum of three strings at one time.

My main electrics are two Duesenberg Starplayer TVs, one Phonic and one Deluxe. I used them to play some solos on *Covered Tracks*. I mostly used a Les Paul Standard to play slide solos. "Midnight Rider" is a good example. Having a bit of electric here and there made the recording more multidimensional. When I play live, I run the National's Slimline pickup into my electric amp, which is a Category 5 Voice of the Wetlands head with a 4x10



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cabinet. It's like a 45-watt version of a Fender Super Reverb. The output from the Slimline is relatively low, so the sound naturally cleans up. Having a volume pedal is key for backing off certain notes that feedback due to the inherent nature of a resonator guitar.

What are you using for your live-streaming setup?

Most people use an iPhone, but I've got a home studio setup with some decent gear, so I figured I'd up the quality a notch. I use one mic to capture my vocal and guitar, and another mic that I place in front of the speaker on a Quilter Labs MicroPro 200. It's not technically designed as an acoustic amp, but its solid-state circuitry provides a nice clean sound. I don't use headphones or monitors, so having just those two mics eliminates a lot of variables. From there the signal goes through an Audient iD44 interface and into my computer running Ableton Live, which doesn't take much processing power. I mainly use it just to add some compression. From there the signal flows into an internal routing app, Soundflower's BlackHole, and then into a livestreaming application, Streamlabs OBS [*Open Broadcaster Software*] that allows me to select various inputs, including video from a separate camera. OBS finally sends it all to Facebook.

I don't have outboard compressors, so I have to do it in the box. A little compression makes a big difference in the dynamic range for somebody listening on laptop speakers or even just an iPhone or iPad. Honestly, the iPhone does a pretty good job live streaming on its own, but the next step up from that is everything I mentioned.



Unfortunately, there's not much in between. It's a lot to go through, but there's also a lot of competition for attention online and every advantage helps.

What's the live gig situation in New Orleans right now?

For almost a full year we had pretty much no live music, in part due to the nature of New Orleans. People come down here to party, so we couldn't even have outdoor music for a while, just to discourage gathering together in crowds. That's sort of coming back, and now they've even opened the bars. I'm doing some outdoor shows around here, and am hopeful for full-scale touring in the fall. I wasn't able to support *Below Sea Level* on the road last fall, so I'm looking forward to playing that live, and I'm starting to get calls to play acoustic shows as well. I'm in the process of dialing in my live acoustic signal chain right now. It feels like we're at a turning point.

Check out the Frets Learn column "Stageworthy Strategies, part 2," on page 75, for signal-chain solutions.

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OPEN TO OPTIONS

How to put the open-string chord-voicing prowess of Wayne Krantz to work.

BY CHRIS BUONO



PETER VAN BREUKELEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

IT'S SAFE TO say your first moments with a guitar probably involved one or more open strings, courtesy of the handful of 1st-position open chords (a.k.a. cowboy chords) that we all became acquainted with early on. Stalwarts such as open E, C and G shapes were reasonably playable, but even better, they sounded full and lively. As you started to learn an assemblage of tunes from your favorite bands and players, you discovered that open chords, as well as open strings in general, are everywhere. Here's why: There's nary a note on your guitar that sounds as full and vibrant as an open string. Go further down the open-string rabbit hole and you'll find other benefits they provide, such as giving your playing a more modern sound, with added depth and color. Some of my favorite ways to use open strings to these ends were gleaned from one of my all-time favorite guitarists, the great Wayne Krantz.

If you're new to Krantz, allow me to remedy that. He is a musical beacon of light among forward-thinking guitarists whose passion is improvised music centered on the deepest of pockets. While Krantz has a distinguished résumé of sideman work with various artists, such as Steely Dan, Michael Brecker, Billy Cobham, Leni Stern and others, his impact is more realized through his own work. Jumping onto the scene as a leader with his 1990 album, *Signals*, it quickly became evident that Krantz had a signature six-string voice. *Long to Be Loose* from 1993 confirmed that notion, featuring masterful compositions that showcase the guitarist's deft approach to harmony and syncopated rhythms, creatively supported by bassist Lincoln Goines and drummer Zach Danziger. These offerings, as well as Krantz's 1995 live album, *2 Drink Minimum*, which is regarded by many modern improvising musicians as a go-to desert island disc, are also brimming with novel approaches to the use of open strings.

Perpetually moving ahead, Krantz went on to recruit bassist Tim Lefebvre and drummer Keith Carlock at a time when they were young players new to the scene. This trio's work, namely through Wayne's fabled Thursday-night residency at the 55 Bar in New York City, solidified all three musicians as some of today's most important purveyors of improvisation-driven music on their respective axes. After documenting this group several times, between *Greenwich Mean* (1999) and *Krantz Carlock Lefebvre* (2009), Krantz has since released several acclaimed works that feature all-star casts and showcase his uniquely seductive playing. To date, the guitarist's recorded output, from *Signals* to his latest set, 2020's *Write Out of Your Head*, offers many fine examples of how he inventively employs open strings in ways that demand your attention.

Let's begin our look into Krantz's distinctive approach to using open strings with a trio of common riffs that are coupled with Krantz-inspired ideas, inspired by a solo piece on *Signals* called "One of Two." In **Ex. 1a** we have a Jimi Hendrix–like multipositional move up a G major arpeggio (G, B, D), en route to a 1st-inversion G chord voicing (low to high: B, D, G). **Ex. 1b** first demonstrates how Wayne would enhance a stock riff

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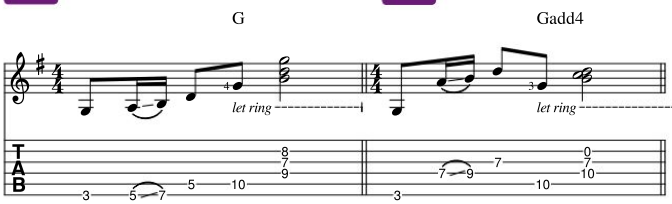
For audio of this lesson, go to **guitarplayer.com/july21-lesson1**

by supplanting some of it up an octave. The musical gold, however, resides in the transformative Gadd4 cluster voicing that incorporates the use of the open B string. With the 3rd of the chord (B) now played open, this allows the added 4th (C) to be fretted on the 4th string. The result is a mouth-watering harmonic morsel containing a nested minor-2nd interval, between the 3rd and 4th of the chord (B and C). Additional buried treasure is the timbral seasoning that the open B string imparts.

Examples 2a and **2b** transform a stock two-bar funk vamp based on a Dm7 chord (D, F, A, C) into a head-snapping syncopated tour de force. Krantz generally eschews the funk rhythm staple of percussive "scratch strumming" that helps drive Ex. 2a and will often replace it with invigorating syncopated ricochet action between downstroke riffing on the lower strings and laying down novel-sounding voicings on the higher strings. To play the notes on the D, G and B strings on the upbeat of beat 1 of Ex. 2b, use your fret-hand pinkie to grab the 10th-fret C while you employ hybrid picking with the pick hand. As the pick plays the fretted C, your middle and ring fingers pick the open G and B strings, respectively. Together with the D root on the 6th string that precedes it, this note combination and cluster conveys a lush Dm7(4/6) sound. Continue to use these hybrid picking assignments per adjacent strings throughout the example, including the sliding perfect 4ths, which require thumb fretting for that same tonic D note. Keep the thumb there and use a downstroke for the notes on the top four strings for what equates to a snappy Dm11 voicing. The various techniques applied here can serve as a general guide to playing the examples that follow.

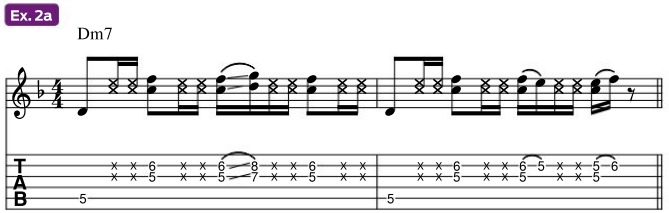
While the i - ♭III - ♭VI progression of suspended chords in the key of B minor (Bsus4 - Dsus2 - Gsus2) in **Ex. 3a** follows a straight eighth-note groove and concludes with a time-honored arpeggiation move, **Ex. 3b** is a rhythm section's syncopated dream come true. It's also an example of open strings bolstering not only chords but riffs too.

Ex. 1a

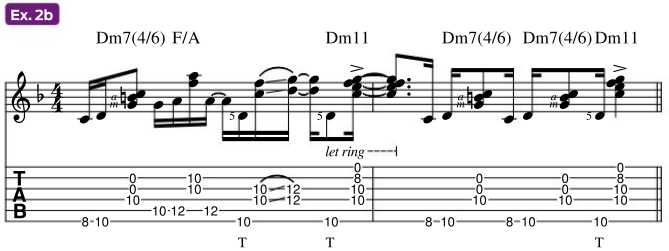


Ex. 1b

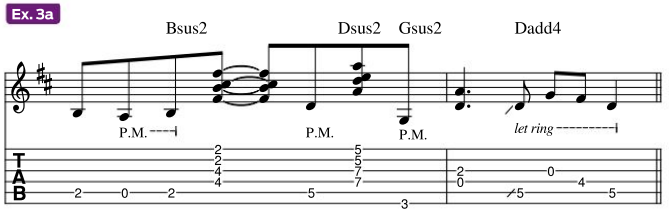
Ex. 2a



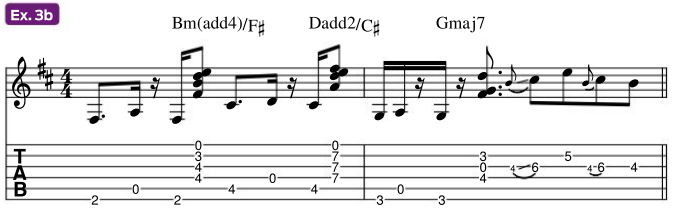
Ex. 2b



Ex. 3a



Ex. 3b



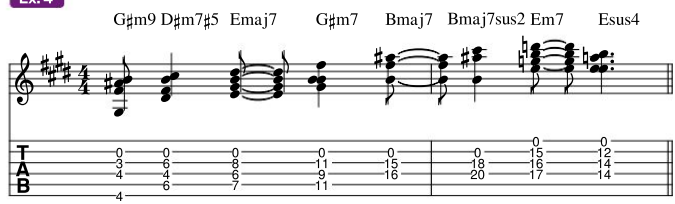
For each syncopated three-note motif that precedes the chords, pick downstrokes for the fretted notes and use a hybrid-picked accent for the open-string notes. All chords should be played with laser-precise downstrokes. Be sure to arch your fretting fingers high, so that the open high E string in the Bm(add 4)/F♯ and Dadd2/C♯ voicings and the open G in the Gmaj7 ring out as intended. Once again, notice how the employment of open strings here facilitates the use of 2nd intervals, with major 2nds on the top of the first two chords and a minor 2nd occurring within the Gmaj7 voicing. For the single notes at the end of bar 2, use downstrokes on the G string and fingerpick the E note on the B string. Putting it all together, the use of downstrokes and hybrid picking, along with legato grace-note slides, is signature Krantz.

Also informed by Krantz's riffing in "One of Two," **Ex. 4** reveals a reworking of an ascending array of chords that demonstrates how the guitarist will use an open string as a common tone among changing chords. Starting with the G♯m9, the open B string, and later the open high E, serve as both a constant pitch and an almost angelic tonal element. Speaking to the latter, combined with low-wattage amps set to the brink of breakup and Wayne's commitment to single-coil pickups, open strings seem to thrive in his hands, even more so when hybrid picked.

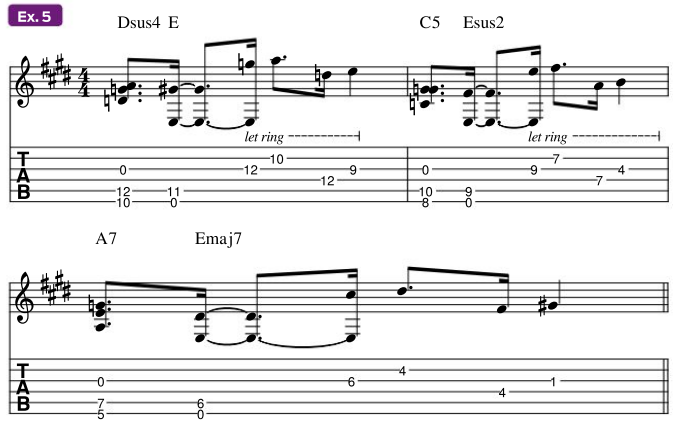
Starting with the Bmaj7 chord at the end of bar 1, notice that the open-string notes become the roots. As you work your way up the neck here, the open string will become the lowest note in the chord and often serve as the root, even when it's physically in the middle or at the top of the voicing. Keep this in mind when considering my chord naming going forward. At the same time, looking at the notation and seeing the actual pitch hierarchy will help dispel possible confusion.

Ex. 5 is inspired by what Wayne plays in "Worn Torn Johnny," from *Krantz Carlock Lefebvre*. Here, you see a consistent open G string color each power chord a different shade while a

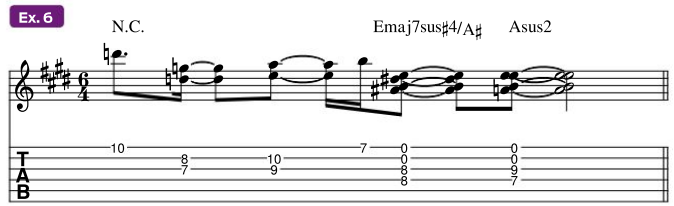
Ex. 4



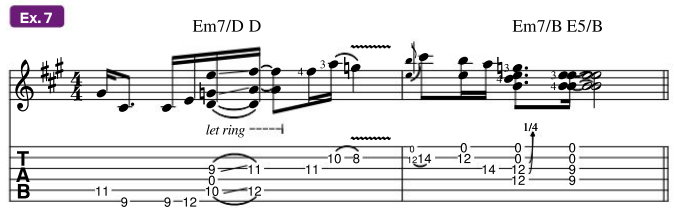
Ex. 5

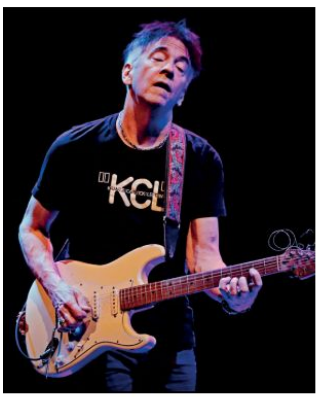


Ex. 6



Ex. 7





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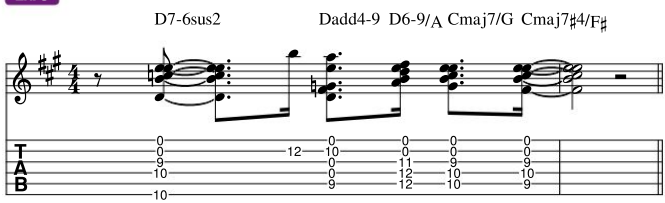
recurring open low E creates brooding dyads and hovers over the following motives. Though they're not nested in the chords, the ever-present 2nd intervals are what make up those following two-note melodic statements. For added Krantz effect, let them ring together as best as you can. And for the smoothest transition from the chords to the single notes, fret the first single note of each bar with your pinkie.

When it comes to open strings, we all like to bask in the chime-y goodness of the open B and high E, when played in conjunction with fretted notes on the lower strings. That said, in Wayne's world, you'll discover an innovative perspective on this approach, such as this broken-up iteration of a moment from another KCL track called "Jeff Beck" in **Ex. 6**. Check out the contrary-motion counterpoint between the fretted notes of Emaj7sus♯4/A♯ and Asus2.

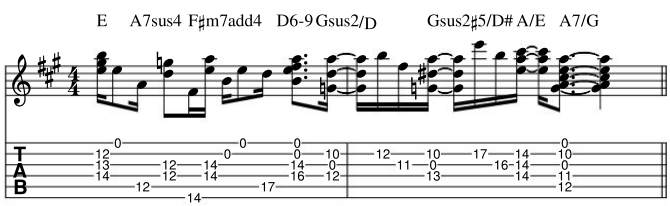
Ex. 7 emulates another taste from the same tune, where Krantz goes for a static perfect-4th shape on the lower fretted notes of the chords Em7/B and E5/B. Notice in bar 2 the slight, quarter-tone bend, or "curl," on the A-D dyad in the Em7/B. Looking back to the Em7/D and D chords in bar 1, you'll see an open string surrounded by fretted notes. This exemplifies Wayne's flagship use of open strings within chords.

Shifting to *Long to Be Loose*, **Ex. 8** is reminiscent of a passage in the album's

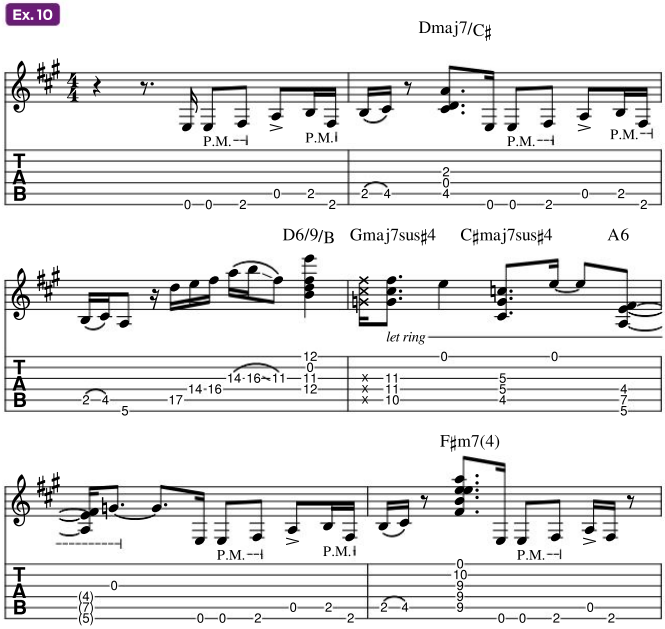
Ex. 8

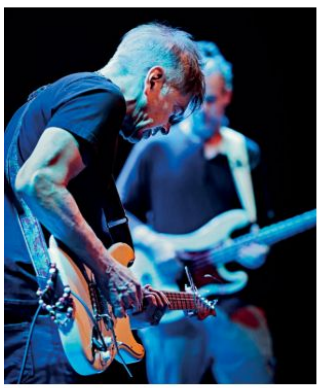


Ex. 9



Ex. 10





PETER VAN BREUKELEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

10th track that further promotes this procedure, this time as part of thoughtfully voiced five-note chords.

Ex. 9 offers additional demonstrations inspired by the same tune with added considerations. In bar 1, there's arpeggiation action on the open strings of the F♯m7add4 before you downstroke the open-string-enhanced D6-9. Bar 2 gives way to more three-note open-string harmonic sandwiches before moving ahead to two more Krantz trademarks. There's the descending melodic perfect 4th (D-A) preceding a chord (A/E), along with an open-string-laced A7 voicing with a fretted major 3rd on the lowest strings.

Inspired by solo pieces like "One of Two," this lesson's final offering, **Ex. 10**, sets the ideas and techniques presented throughout this lesson in a call-and-response conversation with a riff that's also informed by "It's No Fun Not to Like Pop" (*Krantz Carlock Lefebvre*).

If this concentrated look into one of the several fascinating aspects of Wayne Krantz's guitar style is your introduction to him as a player, I encourage you to investigate him further and take a deep dive into his recorded works, both as a leader and sideman, as well as his tell-all tome, *An Improviser's OS*. At the very least, it will make you think, but I predict the world of Wayne Krantz will do much more and provide some welcomed musical inspiration, just as it did for me.

Stageworthy Strategies, Pt. 2

Understanding acoustic preamps, D.I.s and digital enhancers.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

LIVE GIGS ARE suddenly coming back, and lots of players who've stripped down their sound during the pandemic are seeking ways to translate it faithfully to the stage. Last month we looked at saddling up an acoustic workhorse. This month, we'll talk about how to assemble a stage-worthy signal chain. The rig can be as simple as a direct box or as complicated as NASA's Mars Perseverance Mission. Your own dedicated acoustic amplifier is the most reliable companion, but let's back burner it for the sake of this discussion, since it represents the end of the signal chain, and you may not be able to use it for every gig. It all starts with a pickup, and since we addressed the pros and cons of piezos and magnetics in the March issue, this column will delve into the mystery of preamps, direct boxes and digital enhancers before moving onward.

PREAMP PRIMER

Preamps are key to fantastic acoustic-electric tone. The ubiquitous piezo bridge pickup's weak signal requires a preamp just to achieve line level, and most modern acoustic-electrics come with at least a basic onboard preamp. If your guitar uses a battery and has any controls, that's the preamp. The higher the quality of the pickup and preamp, the better that simple setup will sound.

Adding an external preamp is the next step up, and it's often the reason why a player achieves a robust tone that comes across more smooth and sculpted compared to another player that simply plugs into the venue's beat-up direct box. Simply bringing a high-quality passive direct box such as a Radial JDI with its nice Jensen transformer will mitigate piezo quack and add harmonic content. Every acoustic guitar amp has a preamp section, but even if you've got a pretty good onboard guitar preamp and another in the amp, your tone can benefit from being bolstered and sculpted along the signal chain. If your onboard electronics aren't top shelf or you're not going to employ an amp, then a good external preamp can make all the difference in the world for achieving consistent sonic quality.

TRAMPLED UNDER FOOT

As manufacturers continue the trend toward stealth electronics for guitar, it naturally follows that there's more tweaking left to do on the floor. The Pigtronix Bob Weir's Real Deal acoustic preamp [*reviewed in February 2019*] is a tweaker's delight built on a small platform. Larger compound direct box features are likely to include a low-noise preamp with multiple gain structure, fine equalization and anti-feedback options, flexible I/O and perhaps compression. Think of it like a channel strip for the stage. See our review of Radial's dual-channel PZ-Pro in January 2021 for an excellent example. The brand-new Orange Acoustic Pedal is essentially a speaker-less amp with a surprisingly full feature set on a relatively small footprint. Fishman and L.R. Baggs offer floor models, from straightforward to fancy, and both have been advancing acoustic electronics in the digital era.

DIG INTO DIGITAL ENHANCEMENT

Fishman changed the D.I. game in 2004 with Aura imaging technology, which the manufacturer eventually integrated into everything from compound floor units to single stomp boxes to onboard guitar systems. The basic idea was to make a piezo pickup approximate a mic'd-up acoustic. The core technology is built on Impulse Response measurements, and the same stuff went on to be used in the Kemper Profiler amp and Audio Sprockets' ToneDexter pedal. Its customization options are awesome but require access to a studio with good mics to reach full potential. Baggs recently introduced the Voiceprint pedal, which democratizes customization via an iPhone app that uses its onboard mic for mapping, and its powerful processor to evaluate acoustic guitar properties compared to the pickup signal [*see Meet Your Maker, page 24*]. The app renders a custom filter, which it then sends to the pedal paired with Bluetooth. Look for a review in the next issue.



The Pigtronix Bob Weir's Real Deal acoustic preamp is a tweaker's delight.

The bottom line for all acoustic electronics is sonic integrity and sculptability. It's imperative to have a handle on one's core tone before further processing. We'll dig deep into effects and amps next on our way to post-pandemic stage-worthiness.

HOME RIGS OF THE STARS

What do guitar heroes play when they're off the clock? **John Petrucci, Paul Gilbert, Sonny Landreth** and five other axe slingers reveal the gear they use every day.



Sonny Landreth


Marty Friedman


Myles Kennedy


Ron "Bumblefoot" Thal



Paul Gilbert



John Petrucci





Vintage Fender combos (above left) include a 1968 "drip edge" Vibrolux (left) and 1960 Super (front). A stash of fine axes (above right) and Alex's Apple MacBook Pro with Alesis V49 keyboard/MIDI controller (below).

ALEX SKOLNICK



HIS GENRE-SPANNING career includes thrash-metal titans Testament and the jazz-leaning Alex Skolnick Trio, but he's also led the acoustic-based Alex Skolnick's Planetary Coalition of artists from around the world and has his own podcast, *Moods & Modes*. The Brooklyn-based musician took us inside his home studio, which is always primed for those moments when inspiration strikes.

What's your home rig's main purpose?
Mainly recording and songwriting. For woodshedding, I'll usually just play through an amp or acoustically. If inspiration strikes, I'll hit "record" on the iPhone or Zoom H8 MP3 recorder.

What's in it?
Recording: Apple MacBook Pro OS Catalina running Logic ProX 10.6.2, with an IK Multimedia Axe I/O interface and iLoud speakers, and a Fishman Platinum Pro EQ/DI analog preamp for acoustic guitar with pickup and electric bass
Electric guitar tone options: Kemper Profiler, IK Multimedia AmpliTube 5. Zoom G11 multieffects processor, mic'd Fender 1960 Super and Fender 1968 "drip edge" Vibrolux
Mics: Shure SM57, Sennheiser MD 421, Studio Projects C1 (vocals and acoustic guitar without pickup), Røde Procaster (for podcasting)
Other: TC Electronic 2290 digital delay, Alesis V49 keyboard/MIDI controller, Toontrack Superior Drummer 3 software

How did you come to choose this gear?
I had a ProTools rig for a number of years. I found it was hard to keep up with the updates, and whenever I'd get a new computer, it was complete disruption. Once I tried Logic Pro, I liked the feel. It has a user-friendly quality, similar to Garage Band, but on the same professional level of ProTools. I also didn't have the disruption I'd had before, since it's an Apple product.

IK Multimedia has been very supportive, having me design a series of presets for AmpliTube 5, which is really "next level." I have a few interfaces, all good, but their Axe I/O has noticeable quality, and the IK Multimedia Z-Tone DI helps dial in the signal.

The Kemper unit is something that Testament adopted for live shows, encouraged by our sound engineer for its consistency. Since there's a learning curve, I was a bit reliant on my tech and just thought of it as my live rig for metal sounds. Yet once I took it home and found my away around it, I was shocked at all the options, tone-wise and effects-wise. I've used it on the majority of "quarantine video" tracks in 2020 and 2021. All the other gear was either acquired over the years, received through a recommendation, or sent for me to try out and approved.

Do you have a favorite piece of gear?
I've developed an addiction to the Kemper. I know it well, and when I need a sound, I know how to find it.

What's the best thing about your setup?
My system is organized in a way that makes it relatively easy for me to switch in and out of different projects with minimal distraction.

What would you like to change or add to it?
I'm getting to the point where I really need to upgrade my machine. Some of my recent projects have been very dense. They've included a full drum kit (rather than all the drums bounced), and projects with 10 or more musicians. I own a condo in Brooklyn and one of the trade-offs of living in the city is less space, hence my sticking with a laptop. But I feel a desktop beckoning.



RICHIE KOTZEN



IN ADDITION TO being a monster guitar player, Richie Kotzen is a prodigious songwriter. Beyond serving as the primary songwriter during his stints with Mr. Big and Poison, he's released more than 20 solo albums — including 2020's *50 for 50* set, celebrating his 50th birthday — as well as a trio of discs with the Winery Dogs. As he reveals below, his home rig is rarely ever turned off.







Kotzen's control room (top) features a wealth of gear he's used to record most of his records. His 1975 Neumann U87 mic (right) has been with him most of his career, and he owns a pair of racked vintage Neve 1073 mic preamps (above).

What's your home rig's main purpose?
To make my records and occasionally record other folks. Although my setup has been relocated on three separate occasions, the actual gear has been used to record most of my music, including the Mr. Big album *Actual Size*, as well as both Winery Dog albums and *50 for 50*. When it was out of my home, it was part of a public recording studio I used to own called Headroom. Gene Simmons, among other well-respected folks, recorded there. Since then, I moved the gear back into my home and trimmed down some of the components I found unnecessary for my own personal use.

What's in it?
As far as gear, I've got preamps and various compressors from Manley, API, Neve, Focusrite and ADL, to name a few. I've got some vintage Neumann and AKG microphones as well. I don't really use much EQ when I record, because for me it's primarily about the microphone placement, and the preamp and compression. Of course, using Neve or API preamps plays a major role in making it easier to get tone. My favorite compressor is my Anthony DeMaria Labs C/L 1000 or the 1500 if I'm recording something in stereo.

How did you come to choose this gear?
I started making records at a very young age and I was always curious why recording engineers would select specific gear for certain recording applications. I would always ask questions, so I learned very quickly what I liked, and that's what I went out and bought when I put together my recording setup many years ago. In earlier times, I had an MCI 24-track machine with 16-track heads on it. It sounded great, but it was a pain in the ass to deal with. Once Pro Tools came out, I switched over and never looked back.

Do you have a favorite piece?
My pair of vintage Neve 1073 mic preamps. These are the real deal, racked by Dan Alexander in San Francisco.

What's the latest addition to your rig?
For my 50th birthday, Larry DiMarzio gave me an amazing preamp made by a company called Inward Connections. I believe the company goes under Tree Audio now. This thing sounds fantastic and is very similar to my API mic pre amps which I love.

What's the best thing about your setup?
It's designed for my style of recording and my needs. I usually end up playing everything myself on my records, and my setup is such that every instrument is always mic'd up and ready to go.

What would you like to change or add?
The drum live room is down a flight of stairs. To compensate for that, I have a large monitor in it and a keyboard with a mouse next to my drum set, which is tied into the control-room computer. It's great because I can fully run my Pro Tools from behind the drums without having to run to the control room every time I want to fix or change something.

PAUL GILBERT



FROM HIS MID-1980s years with Racer X through his 1990s tenure with Mr. Big, Paul Gilbert established himself as one of the great guitar virtuosos of the era. In addition to releasing his latest solo album, *Werewolves of Portland*, he's continued to issue loads of video lessons for students of his online guitar school (**paulgilbert.com/guitar-school**), all of which makes steady use of his home rig. Paul eschewed our questionnaire to provide his own rig tour.

"I built a small pedalboard that I keep near my main computer desk. I use it to practice, write songs, do Zoom/Skype interviews and record into Pro Tools. The selection of pedals changes sometimes, but my JHS PG-14 overdrive is usually front and center. The EarthQuaker Devices Dispatch Master is nice because I can get both reverb and delay without taking up a lot of space. The MXR Phase 100 makes me feel like Johnny Winter. And the Catalinbread Callisto chorus is for vintage Rush-style riffs. I send this into a Marshall JTM1C running clean. I keep my favorite Ibanez Fireman guitars nearby and my iPhone for recording song ideas quickly.

"On the other side of my desk, I keep a 1978 Ibanez Artist hollowbody. It's loud enough acoustically that I can hear it without using an amp. So when I need to quickly figure out a song or try out an idea, this is the guitar I grab.

"In back of my desk is my Ibanez miKro double-neck and my cat. I think you can see why these are important.

"The other room in my studio is where I shoot videos for my online rock guitar school at Artistworks. Lately I've been running amps in stereo, as the TC Electronic Arena reverb, Alter Ego delay and MXR Stereo Chorus all sound great with a stereo spread.

"I've got two Marshall Bluesbreaker combo amps. I love these amps, but when I'm sitting really close to the transformers, it creates some hum, so I'm actually using a Marshall JTM1C, and a Marshall JTM45 head (running into one of the speakers on the Bluesbreaker), both far enough away from me to prevent hum. I've got GIK acoustic panels covering most of the other walls to deaden the sound. This is really important to help keep things focused, especially in small rooms.





Gilbert's small pedalboard and guitars are near his main computer desk (above), while the larger stereo rig is for videos (below left). His cat lounges near his Ibanez miKro double-neck (below right).

"I built a larger pedalboard for this room. My prototype signature MojoMojo overdrive by TC Electronic (same as the factory model, except it's purple and has a switch that goes to 11) is on most of the time. I use the JHS PG-14 to add more sustain and to tailor the pick attack. I've been testing out an experimental Dunlop Cry Baby Junior wah-wah that has an external bypass switch. This switching system is a lot easier for me (especially sitting down), compared to the standard foot switch. The pedal that looks like a hockey puck, is a Peterman Puck'N Stompa — a hockey puck, modified to sound like a bass drum, when you stomp on it. This plugs into my mixer and allows me to keep time with my left foot.

"Recently, I set up another small pedalboard for my TC Electronic Ditto Looper. I use the One Control 1 Loop Box as an A/B switcher. This sends my guitar to the Ditto Looper to record the audio loop. The Ditto goes out to a Roland Micro Cube amp. After the loop is recorded, I switch back to my main stereo Marshall rig for the solos."



MYLES KENNEDY



IN A TYPICAL year, Myles Kennedy would have been busy in his roles as singer and guitarist for Alter Bridge and as vocalist for Slash's backup band, Myles Kennedy and the Conspirators. But since lockdown, he's had time to work in his home studio, where he created demos for his new solo album, *The Ides of March*.

What's your home rig's main purpose?
Woodshedding, songwriting, recording. I have two rigs placed strategically to keep me inspired no matter where I am.

What's in them?
In my loud room, I have a Diezel Schmidt and Paul Amp into a 2x12 cabinet with Tone Tubby speakers. Sometimes, when I want a tweed vibe, I'll plug into the '58 Fender Deluxe. In my writing/demo room, the main go-to is a Universal Audio Apollo x4 interface. I use the Diezel VH4 and '55 Fender Deluxe amp plug-ins for late-night recording. I'll fire up my '53 Fender Super Amp when I want to play loud enough to freak out the neighborhood.

How did you come to choose this gear?
I discovered Diezel amps while we were making the the second Alter Bridge record in 2007. I integrated their amps into my home rigs for writing in that realm, but for my solo material the older Fender tweeds hit the mark. For demos, the Universal Audio interface can't be beat. I started using it last year while writing *The Ides of March*. I retired most all of my outboard gear once I realized how effective the plug-ins are.

Do you have a favorite piece?
My '58 Deluxe sounds stunningly good. I also love the Diezel Schmidt. It's like a Vox AC30 on steroids.

What's the latest addition?
PRS just sent me a prototype for a new take on a classic amp. It's a beast. I wish I could tell you more.







A selection of primo axes (top), Myles' 1953 Fender Super Amp (center) and his favored Diezel Schmidt (bottom).

What's the best thing about your rig?
It's relatively simple. I'm just trying to keep the tone intact without compromising it by using too many pedals before hitting the amp.

What would you like to change or add?
I think I'm going to have to build a studio outside of my living environment — a real man cave with tacky velvet Elvis posters, lava lamps and assorted arcade games surrounding an API console.

How much use did it get this past year?
A ton. There was nothing else to do but write and play music. I haven't been this productive in years.

JOHN PETRUCCI



AS DREAM THEATER'S virtuoso guitarist, John Petrucci is one of rock and progressive metal's most inspiring axe men. Beyond his own recent solo disc and a new one from Liquid Tension Experiment, he's been at work on Dream Theater's next album. Given his busy schedule, it's small wonder his "home" rig is a fully outfitted studio a mere 20-minute drive from his house.

What's your rig's main purpose?
Writing, recording and producing records as well as rehearsing, press, promotion and so on.

What's in it?
Guitars and amps: Ernie Ball Music Man John Petrucci Majesty guitars, Mesa/Boogie John Petrucci JP-2C amplifiers
Recording: Pro Tools, RND Shelford





John's signature Mesa/Boogie JP-2C amps with cabs and switching system (top), and a rack of Ernie Ball Music Man Majesty guitars (below).





The control room (top) and racks of gear (below), including Petrucci's favored RND Shelford channels.

channels, and RND 5024, RND D8 and Black Lion Audio B12 preamps
Monitors: KRK V8, Adam A7X, Ex Machina Quasar, sE Electronics Munro Egg
Mics: Mojave 301, Royer 121, Shure SM7B, Shure KSM353, Sennheiser MD 421, Audio-Technica ATM450, sE V2 and Audio-Technica AE2500

How did you come to choose this gear?
Virtually all of the gear in this studio has been chosen by Dream Theater engineer James "Jimmy T" Meslin.

Do you have a favorite piece?
The RND Shelford channels have proven to be crucial in this setup. They are extremely versatile and the key to capturing great recording tone from multiple instrument sources. Having said that, without my signature guitars and amps, I'd have nothing to capture!

What's the best thing about your setup?
The space itself is incredible and perfectly conducive to creativity and productivity.

What would you like to change or add?
I'd like to increase the size of studio's live room and add a more elaborate photo/video studio.

MARTY FRIEDMAN



SINCE 2003, THE former Megadeth guitarist has been flourishing in Japan, where he's just released *Tokyo Jukebox 3*, the third installment in his series of albums featuring instrumental covers of Japanese songs. As he explains, his home rig plays a crucial role in helping him develop his ideas and performance before he records the tracks in earnest.

What's your home rig's main purpose?
It's strictly for pre-production purposes. Its the simplest, barest-bones setup, but it has all that's necessary for laying down ideas or tracking and editing demos.

What's in it?
A MacBook Pro, GarageBand, Blackstar Fly speakers, Korg microKEY air; IK Multimedia AXE I/O interface, AmpliTube 5 and Modo Drum; Mooer GE300 amp-modeling processor and Hornet digital-modeling combo, Maxon Auto Filter, my Jackson MF-1 and a few other guitars and basses.

How did you come to choose this gear?
The simplest easy-to-use, good-sounding gear is all I care about in the demo process, so that's what I try to choose.



Friedman's bare-bones setup for demos includes a MacBook Pro (above) and a selection of guitars and basses (below).

What's the latest addition to it?
AmpliTube 5. Sonically, I think it's much better than 4, and that was super already.

What's the best thing about your rig?
When I'm playing, writing, recording or performing, I don't want to think about anything other than the content of the music. This is especially true at the idea stage and the demo process, which is what I use this rig for. I don't need lots of tonal options at this stage. If I have an idea, I press "record," and it's done. Occasionally, I'll fall in love with some lucky mojo that happened on a phrase from one of my home demos, and I'll slip it into a recording, but that's rare.

One good thing about working this way is that, before actual tracking, I'll have recorded many demos, in every structure, tempo and key imaginable. So by the time I'm doing the real recording, I've decided exactly what I want to do, and I know the material so well that the focus of the actual recording session is purely a performance of material that I am very comfortable with, thanks to having done all the home demos.



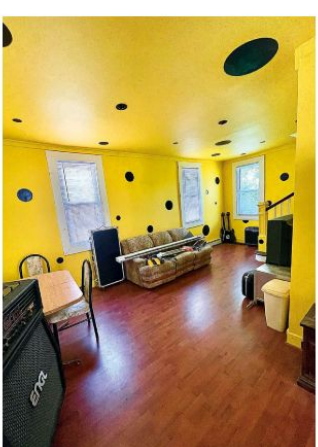


RON "BUMBLEFOOT" THAL



BEYOND HIS HIGH-PROFILE stint with Guns N' Roses from 2006 to 2014, Ron "Bumblefoot" Thal has distinguished himself in the hard-rock supergroups Art of Anarchy and Sons of Apollo, and in his lengthy and diverse solo career. In addition, he writes TV jingles, theme songs and background music. Needless to say, this mad professor's home lab gets regular use.

What's your home rig's main purpose?
Mostly songwriting and recording, but also plenty of mixing and mastering, teaching — all things music. It's a second house I got about 20 years ago for the purpose of having a studio where artists could stay while they work, and I've made great use of it over the years. It's an unusual studio. It has a Swiss Cheese room (to match my old Swiss Cheese guitar) with 3-D holes in the walls, and a big yard that grows berries every summer.



The Swiss Cheese room





What's in the studio?
I have some nice outboard gear but have slowly become in-the-box, which allows me to work from other locations. At the studio, it's a PC with Steinberg Cubase and WaveLab. I have a lot of audio interfaces — Prism Orpheus, IK Multimedia Axe I/O — but I mainly use a Focusrite 18i8 linked to a Focusrite 18i20 (both 3rd-gen) when doing live drums. On the road, I bring a Focusrite 2i2 and a PC laptop with Cubase and WaveLab. I have lots of Shure and Sennheiser dynamic mics, Audio-Technica and AKG condenser mics, Cascade ribbon mics, lots of Line 6 Vetta heads and Engl heads, an old Marshall head, Engl and Marshall cabinets, TC Electronic stompboxes and lots of custom effects, a Morley switchless wah, a G7th capo, glass and metal slides, thimbles... and a kazoo, ha ha! Plus Vigier electric guitars and Cort acoustic guitars all over the place.

How did you come to choose this gear?
The equipment built up over decades of recording and touring. There are many memories and events connected to every piece of gear.

Do you have a favorite piece?
That would have to be the Vigier signature series DoubleBfoot fretted/fretless double-neck guitar. That's my main piece of gear. Next in line is the Line 6 Helix Native plug-in. I get every possible guitar tone I could imagine, and it adds so much to the writing and production. The song "Planetary Lockdown" that I released last year wouldn't have happened if not for the features in the Helix.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Focusrite interfaces with a Focusrite Octopre, Prism Sound Orphus and Amtec EQs; the drum room; the monitor shares space with a capo, slide, Aeon sustainer and kazoo; the heart of the system

What's the latest addition to your rig?
TC Electronic makes a hand-held string sustainer called Aeon. I've been using that a ton with the fretless, and I love it!

What's the best thing about your setup?
The drum room. It's 11-by-22, with nine-foot walls and a ceiling that slopes up to 15 feet. It's a loud room and gets great reflections that bring the drums to life. Lots of tone and energy. You can't fake that with artificial reverb on close mics. You need the full reflections.

What would you like to change or add?
I'd like to remove gear that I no longer use and find a home for them where they'll be used and not collect dust.

SONNY LANDRETH



THE SLIDE GUITAR wizard has been called the King of Slydeco for the zydeco influence that runs through his work. Combining right-hand techniques of picking, tapping and slapping, with left-hand moves like fretting behind the slide, Landreth is a virtuoso like no other. Here's what he uses to keep in practice, write songs and make demos.

What's your home rig's main purpose?
It's my little one-stop, multifunction station for practicing, fleshing-out songs, trying out new gear and recording tracks that'll help jumpstart the next album in a real studio with my engineer, Tony Daigle. It also gives me an off-the-clock, stress-free way to work on other artists' projects, too.

What's in it?
Though I keep a lot of gear handy, I basically start with the same tried-and-true drive section on my pedalboard that I use onstage: guitar signal into a Demeter Fuzzulator for boosting solos, then to a Hermida Mosferatu, Analog Man Comp and Voodoo Lab Giggity preamp/EQ pedal combination. From there I go into whichever of my amp heads I wanna use with a Universal Audio OX Amp Top Box or a Dumble 2x12 cab, depending on which neighbors are home. Or I'll change things up with a profile I've tweaked to as near the quantum level as I can get. Kemper, Fractal Audio or Line 6 — they're all ridiculously good. Next in line is my mic pre and EQ before hitting a Demeter VTCL-2 tube comp/limiter in front of the iMac. Monitoring the whole shebang is an ART SLA-1 power amp that fires up a pair of Yamaha NS-10 speakers. I'm still running an earlier version of ProTools with a Digidesign Command 8 controller. Works for me and still more than good enough to make the cut sonically.







Sonny's rig (top) includes several amp heads, a pedalboard (right) whose drive section mimics that of his live pedalboard and a rack (left) that includes his API lunchbox (shown in photo, top left).

How did you come to choose this gear?
Oh, man, lots of trial and error. And I've been lucky. All the years in studios and on the road exposed me to a lot of stuff and gave me the opportunities to discover and experiment with it all. The main thing for me is that each piece of gear in the chain — pickups, pedals, outboard gear, whatever — has to make a difference and contribute directly to the best sound I can get

Do you have a favorite piece?
That would be the vintage API lunchbox that the late, great Brent Averill put together for me back in 1994. It has two 312 mic cards and two 550A EQs. My producer, R.S. Field, turned me on to him and API way back then, and it's been a blessing. I think anything sounds great through it, but I've always found the midrange clarity and chime it gives my electric guitars to be extra special.

What's the latest addition to your home setup?
I recently got the compact version of the SlideRIG dual-comp pedal from Origin Effects. That's really cool, and I used it for a track on Dion DiMucci's new album in the works.

What's the best thing about your home rig?
Accessibility. It's literally part of my bedroom in a loft, so, for better and for worse, it's right there.

What would you like to change or add?
I'll eventually have to upgrade to a new computer, but I'm in no rush. Otherwise — and I can't believe I'm saying this — I'm really happy with what I have. But there's always something else around the corner to check out. That's part of the fun... and the torture.

GUILD

BT-258E Deluxe 8-string Baritone

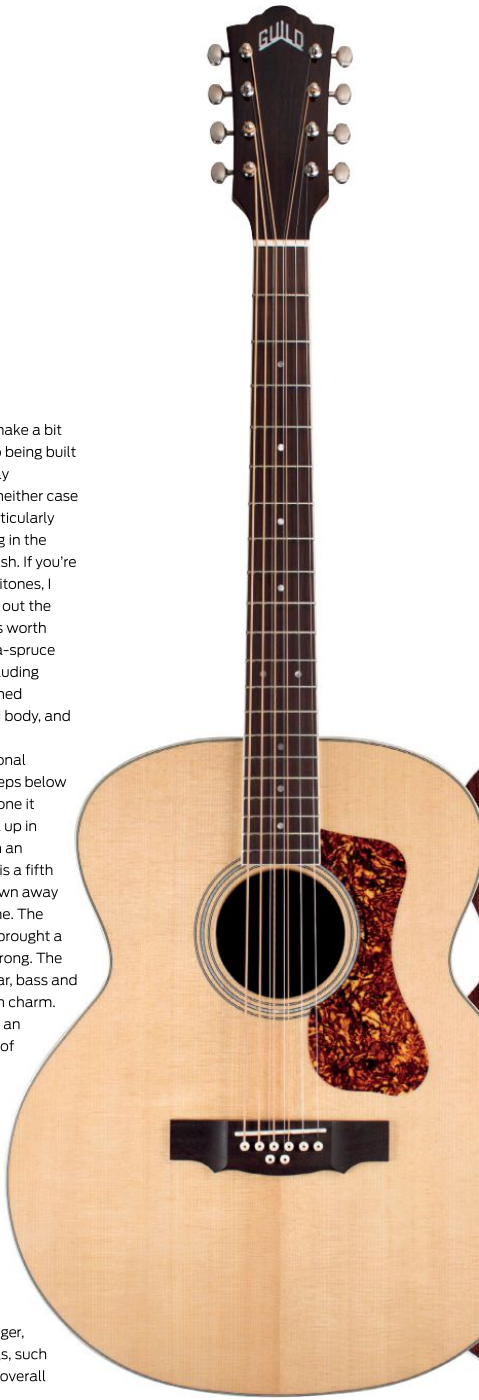
TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

GUILD DROPPED BIG news at NAMM's Believe in Music Week in the form of two baritones: the BT-240E and a fascinating eight-string model, the BT-258 on review here. Built on Guild's bodacious jumbo body platform, they occupy a sonic range right between a bass and a standard acoustic. The BT-258 is especially interesting because it features octave string pairs in the third and fourth slots. In the virtual landscape of BIMW, where it was impossible to lay hands on the merchandise, its unique appeal prompted a request for a test sample. Was it really as cool as it seemed on the screen?

The BT-258 arrived in a box that appeared a bit small for a jumbo, and the reason became apparent upon opening it. (The almost-too-nice price started to make a bit more sense as well.) In addition to being built in China for the affordable Westerly Collection, the guitar comes with neither case nor gig bag. UPS had not been particularly careful, and there was a small ding in the natural gloss polyurethane top finish. If you're interested in one of these new baritones, I highly recommend that you check out the jumbo cases Guild has on offer. It's worth protecting such a lovely solid Sitka-spruce top, as well as Deluxe features including laminated rosewood sides, an arched rosewood back, a bound neck and body, and a Fishman GT-1 pickup system.

The BT-258 tunes up in traditional baritone fashion two and a half steps below standard, so from strings eight to one it goes: B E aA dD F♯ B. Chords stack up in familiar ways, but when you strum an open E shape, the sounded chord is a fifth below, at B. I was immediately blown away by its deep, clear and powerful tone. The octave jangle in the middle range brought a smile, and projection was super strong. The BT-258 has elements of harp guitar, bass and 12-string but ultimately has its own charm. The onboard electronics delivered an accurate and even representation of its immense sound, even when plugged into a diminutive Fender Acoustic Junior GO.

Fingerpicking a baritone acoustic is about as close to playing a grand piano as it gets for a guitarist. The scale length is a whopping 27 inches, so the feel approaches that of a bass. I enjoyed the superior snap and terrific sustain, other than at the seventh fret of the fourth string, which was a bit muted. Having longer, thicker strings makes certain things, such as bending, more difficult, but the overall



SPECIFICATIONS

BT-258E Deluxe
CONTACT guildguitars.com
PRICE $629 street ($499 street for B-240E)

NUT WIDTH 1.75", bone
NECK Mahogany
FRETBOARD Pau ferro, 27" scale, 16" radius
TUNERS Guild GBB1 nickel butterbean, 16:1
BODY Solid Sitka-spruce top, laminated arched rosewood back and sides
BRIDGE Pau ferro with compensated bone saddle
ELECTRONICS Guild/Fishman Sonitone GT-1 with sound-hole flywheel volume and tone controls
FACTORY STRINGS D'Addario EXP23 Coated Phosphor Bronze (.016–.070) plus octave strings (.012 & .014)
WEIGHT 5 lbs (as tested)
BUILT China

KUDOS Immense, clear tone with harp-like midrange chime. Good playability
CONCERNS No gig bag or case included











playability of its C-shaped neck is surprisingly normal. The nut width is a familiar 1 3/4 inches, and I was able to get my relatively small fingers everywhere they wanted to go. Having extra octave strings for just the middle strings adds a 12-string element without the hassle of so many extra strings to manage.

Focus on striking them with a plectrum and the resonance is remarkable. Playing the BT-258 brought me back to an experience at NAMM when Martin introduced a Roger McGuinn signature model that included a sole octave string to complement the wound G. McGuinn himself explained to me that after years of making 12-string magic with the Byrds, he realized that a huge percentage of his licks were actually based on the G string, and therefore chose only that string for the octave complement. My experience playing the BT-258 leads me to agree. It feels practically like playing a big six-string, yet sounds almost like a deep-tuned 12. Sweeping chord strums sound massive.

Going the baritone route is a major move on its own, and adding a couple of octaves delivers extra intrigue. It's not the first time we've seen such a beast on the market — Taylor's Baritone-8 had the same configuration — but it's been discontinued and wasn't nearly so affordable. Players in search of a rich, unique sound should appreciate the BT-258 Deluxe 8-string Baritone, and songwriting and studio applications are plentiful. I wound up using it on a session to add body on a grungy, drop-tuned song in the key of C, which is just below where even a good dreadnought can comfortably go. Percussive players will flip out for the 258's "thwap" factor. Bassists looking to move toward an acoustic without going all the way to a standard model should audition this baritone as well. Even when one factors in the extra dough for a jumbo gig-bag or hard case, there is solid value here, and the bottom line is it's a ton of fun!

D'ANGELICO

Excel 59

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

HAVING PUT ITS elaborate headstock on a range of creative solidbody offerings in recent years, as well as a large selection of semi- and fully hollowbody electrics, the revived D'Angelico brand has reimagined a classic from the glory days of its namesake, John D'Angelico, in the new Excel 59. The flat front view might imply a period-correct take on the legendary New York archtop maker's cornerstone Excel model of the late '50s — something already available in the existing Excel EXL-1 model — but a thinline (though still fully hollow) body and other contemporary features help to make it a more timeless creation, and likely broaden its appeal for the contemporary player.

Although the Excel 59 looks and feels pretty big, its 16-inch-wide body is a couple inches smaller than the biggest jazz boxes of the golden age, and it's on par with the ES-335, though a little deeper — 1 7/8 inches — at the rims. It's made from laminated flamed-maple back and sides, with a laminated spruce top, and has a block beneath the Tune-o-matic bridge to support the screwed-in posts. Classic D'Angelico cosmetics include multi-ply binding top and back, bound f-holes and a multi-ply bound tortoiseshell pickguard with stair-step profile. The trapeze tailpiece is also the classic stair-step design — gold plated, as is all the hardware — and it's complemented with tasty reproductions of old Bakelite "cupcake" radio knobs, plus a pointer knob on the three-way pickup selector, all of which looks great against a deep-red finish that the maker calls Viola. (Though a fun aesthetic choice, the rotary selector might prove more difficult for some players to flick for quick pickup changes than a standard three-way toggle.)

In its entirety, the neck is also quite a creation. The ebony fingerboard is bound with multi-ply purfling that reveals itself on both the vertical and horizontal axis, and is inlaid with mother-of-pearl blocks split diagonally with abalone stripes, alternating in ones and twos as they climb the neck. Of course, the headstock is really the D'Angelico



SPECIFICATIONS

Excel 59
CONTACT dangelicoguitars.com
PRICE $1,999 street

NUT WIDTH 1 11/16", bone
NECK Maple/walnut/maple 3-piece, slim "C" profile
FRETBOARD Ebony, 25" scale, 16" radius
FRETS 22 medium-jumbo Jescar 47104
TUNERS Grover Imperial
BODY Thinline hollowbody with laminated spruce top and laminated flame-maple back and sides
BRIDGE Tune-o-matic bridge and D'Angelico stairstep trapeze tailpiece
PICKUPS Two Seymour Duncan D'Angelico Great Dane P-90 single-coils
CONTROLS Volume, tone, three-way rotary selector switch
FACTORY STRINGS D'Angelico Electrozinc .010–.046
WEIGHT 6.8 lbs (as tested)
BUILT Korea

KUDOS A well-built and cleverly-conceived redux of a classic D'Angelico model, which delivers great tone and easy playability across a surprisingly broad range of styles
CONCERNS For some, the three-way rotary pickup selector might impede quick position changes

calling card, and it's adorned as we've come to expect, with three-ply binding surrounding the perimeter and cupola headpin, and both the D'Angelico logo and Excel shield inlaid in genuine mother-of-pearl. There's a gold stair-step truss-rod cover, and the tuners themselves are elegant Grover Imperials that further echo the imperial theme.

All of that decorative goodness, coupled with the light body, makes the guitar a little neck heavy, and there's some leftward dive as it sits on the lap, but it's overcome easily. Our review sample reveals not only a tidily made guitar but also a smooth player, with a great setup right out of the form-fitting hardshell case and an easy action along the 22 well-dressed medium-jumbo Jescar 47104 frets. The neck profile is the slim "C" that's often been popular on jazz guitars, or with fans of the so-called '60s profile in general, and although I tend to prefer a chunkier grab personally, I find it very easy to grip.

If the dimensions and styling imply a design that's not limited to the jazz purists, the pickups help to consolidate the point. The Seymour Duncan Great Dane P-90s, exclusive to D'Angelico, are the traditional fat single-coil pickups that the dog-eared look implies. At 9.27k ohms in the bridge position and 7.82k ohms in the neck, they might seem a little hot-leaning for jazz, but in use they display great balance and are a boon to the guitar's versatility.

Tested through a 1x12 tweed Deluxe-style combo, a Friedman Small Box head and 2x12 cab, and a Fractal Axe-FX III into studio monitors, the Excel 59 revealed a surprising amount of character and a bountiful helping of the crossover potential hinted at elsewhere. It's plenty crisp and clear through clean settings, yet still offers enough grit and sting for some attitudinal twang from the bridge position, Tele-like jangle in the middle, and richly retro jazz tones from the neck P-90 on its own. The neck position stays impressively tight and well defined for a guitar of this type. I also really like the bounce in the playing feel when it's amped up, which translates into a chewy texture that adds a little extra personality to everything.

Give it a little gain — or a lot — and the pickups' potential rawness comes into its own, adding snarl and bite to lead work and a thick, buoyant body to power chords. High-gain amp settings require some caution with your positioning; otherwise, being a fully hollow guitar it will definitely howl when you lean into the amp. But that's easily dealt with, and nothing an experienced player wouldn't expect from such a design. All in all, the Excel 59 is a fun, lively and confident ride that swings easily between jazz, rockabilly, roots and twang, and even some classic rock, and does it all with a lot more ease and authority than its lineage as a thinned-down jazz box might imply. ■

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NEURAL DSP

Quad Cortex Floor Modeler

Guitar Player Editors' Pick



TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

HAVING FORGED A stellar reputation in the world of plug-in software, Finnish developer Neural DSP announced its move into amp-modeling hardware more than a year ago, eliciting excitement from a world already enthralled by the works of Fractal, Line 6, Kemper, Atomic and other amp emulators. Units of the long-awaited Quad Cortex Floor Modeler finally started shipping a few months ago and are just coming to market at the time of writing.

On paper, this excitement was totally warranted, given the Quad Cortex's promise as "the most powerful floor modeler on the planet." That boast encompasses 2GHz of six-core SHARC- and ARM-based processing; more than 50 amps, 70-plus effects and over 1,000 IRs; 256 factory presets and up to 2,560 user preset slots; amp, cab and pedal-capture capabilities; comprehensive touch-screen control and editing; and USB audio-interface capabilities, all in a rugged box measuring 11.5 x 7.5 x 2 inches and weighing 4.2 pounds. Within minutes of my using it, the Quad Cortex demonstrated it is a major new competitor in this market that is defining the future of guitar tone.

The UI consists of 11 stomp switches that double as rotary controls, a large volume knob and, governing it all, a touch screen. In short, just about everything is edited and accessed via that touch screen. (Think of it as a smartphone or tablet remote-control app built right into the floor unit.) For instance, not only does the home screen display the current preset and detailed signal flow, with access to all amp, pedal and cab blocks, but a quick tap on the top right changes whether the foot switches are set for Stomp mode (traditional on/off of pedals and effects), Scene mode (accessing multifunction foot-switch assignments) or Preset mode (accessing eight sub-presets within any current bank). Tap tempo, tuner, and preset bank up and down are also always available.

As I quickly discovered, whenever I was confused about any function or editing task, a quick touch of the relevant screen icon delivered a deeper level that was extremely self-explanatory and easy to fathom. For example, touch a pedal icon onscreen to reveal its control parameters, twist one of the lighted foot-switch rotary knobs to adjust drive, tone or level, hit "done" and...you're done. Other functions and edits might be more involved, but suffice to say it's as simple as can be. It behooves some study, sure, and it's worth reading the elegant Quick Start Guide, but if you've managed to access, edit and save patches on any other modeler to date, you'll find this one a doddle. With that in mind, it's worth mentioning that no editing software is yet available from Neural DSP, although one has been promised and we're told it's in the works.

Connectivity is comprehensive (see the spec chart for details), and the guitar and bass amp emulations include a wide variety of the most popular contestants — subtly renamed renditions of Marshalls, Dumbles, Friedmans, Mesas, Soldanos, Voxes, Fenders, Ampegs and so on, plus a range of creative composites. Third-party IRs can quickly bulk up the already respectable cabinet selection, and the effects include all the basic building blocks you'd expect. All that said, the Neural Capture function is about as easy to use as one could hope and allows you to capture not only your own amps, cabs and pedals but also those of other users. For that matter, Neural DSP has set up a cloud app for users to share personal presets.

I tested the Quad Cortex with a Gibson 1958 Les Paul Reissue, a K-Line Springfield (with three single-coil Strat pickups) and a

SPECIFICATIONS

Quad Cortex Floor Modeler
CONTACT neuraldsp.com
PRICE $1,599 list/street

CONTROLS Volume, 11 dual-function foot-switch/rotary controls, touch-screen interface.
DSP 2GHz Quad-Core SHARC processor
CONNECTIVITY Dual inputs (both XLR and ¼" TS/TRS), FX loop sends/returns 1 and 2 (which can be repurposed for up to four inputs and alternative monitoring), four outputs (two on XLR, two on balanced ¼" TS/TRS), MIDI in and thru, two expression pedal jacks, USB jack, Neural Capture out, WiFi
FEATURES Neural Capture (amp, cab and pedal capturing), full functionality as a stand-alone Class 2.0 8 in/8 out low-latency USB audio interface
WEIGHT 4.2 lbs
BUILT Finland

KUDOS Well made and designed. Extremely easy to use and program, and most importantly it sounds superb
CONCERNS Time will tell whether the integral rotary controls/stomp switches hold up on the road, and Neural DSP has yet to release the editor software at the time of writing

Novo Serus J with P-90s. Speakers included a pair of Mackie HR824 studio monitors for recording and a portable powered PA rig. The unit immediately delivered appealing and expressive sounds and was extremely easy to use in the process.

Deep into 2021, we're way beyond discussing whether the better modeling products sound like real amps, so there's little point of making any good/better/best comparisons on the sonic front. Often the best results require some digging into the presets and tweaking several parameters by ear, which I certainly did, but I also found many of the factory slots extremely pleasing just as they sat. Overall, the unit's DSP presented a "bigness" of soundscape, plenty of air and depth around the notes, and excellent dynamics that enabled a great playing feel and superb touch sensitivity. The results never left me thinking, Okay, but if I plugged into a real Plexi..., the way such adventures did 20 or even 10 years ago.



Neural DSP has predisposed several of the presets, and much of the marketing so far, to the metal and heavy-rock crowd, but don't think for a moment that it's limited to those genres. It does '60s classic-rock crunch, chimey AC30 jangle, glassy blackface-combo bite and twang, and much more. It's really a heady all-rounder, and the sky's the limit once you kick in the Neural Capture capabilities.

Some might feel the Quad Cortex's effects selection is a little lacking alongside the Line 6 or Fractal offerings, but there's more than enough to get the job done onstage, and in the studio most home recordists have plenty more at their fingertips anyway. For pure amp tones, though, a long stint of A/B'ing against my go-to Fractal Axe-FX III proved the Quad Cortex easily able to punch above its weight, and I occasionally found it winning out where I hadn't expected it to. That's pretty impressive when you considering that it's really more competition for the smaller Fractal FM3 floor unit (which is the same price once you add the external FC6 foot controller, which has just six foot switches) or the slightly more expensive Line 6 Helix LT (with touch screen).

From any angle, the Quad Cortex is a clever, feature-packed, well-built and great-sounding unit. What's more, it's truly fun and inspiring to play and easy to use. It promises to be a strong contender in this market, and earns an Editors' Pick Award for its achievement.



Eventide

MICROPITCH DELAY

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

TESTED BY CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI



FOR DECADES, ENGINEERS have used micro-pitch shifting to create detuned delays, chorusing, modulation and stereo widening. The effect began in the mid 1970s as an untended consequence of the then-new Eventide H910 Harmonizer, whose clocking mechanism would flicker between two pitch ratios. By placing two units in parallel, studio engineers found they could use the anomaly to achieve a rich stereo spread. The H910's successor, the H949, had improved clocking and used techniques to produce more precise deviations in pitch, helping further establish micro-pitch shifting as a production tool.

Eventide has now made the effect available in the MicroPitch Delay stomp box, and it's a remarkably versatile tool. In essence, it's a stereo delay with controls to independently adjust pitch for the left and right channels, as well as pitch modulation capabilities courtesy of a low-frequency oscillator (LFO) and an envelope that responds dynamically to your playing. Like other pedals in Eventide's lineup, its controls have dual functions, which you can toggle between with a button on the panel's upper right. The six knobs' primary functions are mix (dry/wet), pitch A (adjusts left-channel pitch from zero to +50 cents), pitch B (adjusts right-channel pitch from zero to -50 cents), depth (amount and intensity of modulation from the LFO or envelope), rate/sens (LFO rate and envelope sensitivity) and pitch mix (adjusts the ratio of the A and B pitches). Their secondary functions are, respectively, tone (adjusts the effect's EQ), delay A and delay B (sets each channel's delay time), mod (selects from three types of modulation), feedback (creates pitch rise and fall effects) and output level.

The unit has foot switches for Tap/Preset, which is used to set the tempo and scroll through the five onboard presets, and Active/Bypass, which in Preset mode is used to load a selected preset. Above them, an LED button on the left toggles the Active/Bypass switch between Latching and Momentary modes, while an LED button on the right toggles between Tap and Tempo modes. Finally, there's an LED ladder to indicate which of the five presets is active.

The pedal's rear panel has a TS/TRS input for mono and stereo sources, left and right outputs, and an expression pedal input that can be configured for an expression pedal, a pedal with aux switch, triple aux switch or MIDI over TRS. There's also a mini USB jack for connecting to Eventide's Device Manager (for software updates and preset management), an I/O level switch to select between guitar and line level (for use with effects loops, DAWs and keyboards), and a jack for the included nine-volt power supply.

As you would expect from Eventide, the quality of the effects is outstanding. The little red box is awesome for delay, chorus and doubling effects, but that of course is just the tip of this iceberg. As mentioned above, the secondary mod parameter lets you choose from three types of pitch modulation: via LFO, via envelope to raise pitch, and via envelope to lower pitch. These last two methods are great for creating dynamically responsive pitch shifts (think Tony Visconti's creative use of the H910 on David Bowie's *Low* to create a pitch-descending snare drum). It's also terrific for creating syrupy chorus and ascending and descending delays via picking dynamics. For even wilder effects, you can map any combination of parameters to an expression pedal and control them in real time.

For that matter, I found the MicroPitch Delay is at its core a fantastic "always-on" sonic enhancer in my signal chain. With a bit of delay and modulation, I created a perfect vibe that added lushness and ambience to my guitar tone. It's richly deserving of our Editors' Pick Award.



SPECIFICATIONS

MicroPitch Delay
CONTACT eventideaudio.com
PRICE $279 street

CONTROLS Mix/tone, pitch A/delay A, pitch B/delay B, depth/mod, rate/sens/feedback, pitch mix/out level
SWITCHES Secondary/primary parameter selector, active button/LED, tap button/LED, Active/Bypass and Tap/Preset foot switches
I/O In (mono/stereo), out 1 and 2, expression, mini USB and 9-volt DC power input
EXTRAS USB cable, 9-volt DC power supply
DESIGNED Little Ferry, NJ
BUILT China

KUDOS A great-sounding and versatile pedal for mono/stereo delay, with independent parallel delay lines. Three types of modulation via LFO or envelope. Parameters can be mapped to expression control
CONCERNS None





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EARTHQUAKER DEVICES

Astral Destiny reverb

TESTED BY CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI



EARTHQUAKER DEVICES HAS made uncommon reverbs a specialty of its extensive pedal line. Yes, you can opt for an amp-like spring reverb with the company's Ghost Echo, or hi-fidelity digital delay and reverb with the Dispatch Maker. But I've also been drawn to EQD pedals like Afterneath, which uses a multitude of short digital delays to create everything from scattered, rhythmic echoes to cavernous reverbs with multiple reflections, and Levitation, which lets you regenerate the higher frequencies of the trails to create harmonic ringing reverbs.

Astral Destiny is the latest reverb pedal in the company's line. It serves up eight types of ambience, some with, and some without, octave effects. As you might guess from the name, these are big-sounding reverbs, with chorus modulation that can make them sound ethereal or haunting.

The eight varieties, selected with the rotary mode control, include Abyss, a large reverb with no octave effect, which is the most "normal" variety of ambience here. The ever-popular Shimmer adds reverb one octave higher to the tail, Sub puts it one octave lower, and Sub Shimmer appends upper and lower octaves. Astral adds upper and lower octaves, combined with a regenerating tail for reverbs of extended length. Ascend produces upward pitch bending, Descend creates downward pitch bending, and Cosmos adds a regenerating reverb pitched a fifth above the original note. As explained in the manual, these last three reverbs work best on sustained notes and chords. The length knob sets the tail's duration, and the preset control lets you select from eight included presets, all of which can be edited or overwritten.

Four smaller rotary controls govern the chorus effect's depth and rate, the treble setting (boost to the right, cut to the left) and the dry-to-wet mix. In addition to the Activate foot switch, Astral Destiny has a Stretch foot switch that doubles the length of decay and adds a temporary change in pitch. Tapping it creates an immediate pitch change, and holding it produces an upward or downward pitch-bend effect whose speed can be adjusted by holding down Stretch while turning the length control.

So far, so good, but EQD has also included an expression input that gives you pedal control over the length, depth, rate, tone or mix settings, and each preset can be saved with a different expression assignment. Swapping between Tails and Full Bypass modes is achieved with a simple maneuver using the power cable and the Activate switch.

Working left to right through the mode control, the reverbs start with the octave-less Abyss setting — a pleasant and all-around useful reverb — and get progressively otherworldly. Shimmer does the familiar upper-octave thing, while Sub adds a bit of warm, shadowy heft one octave below. Sub Shimmer and Astral are both great for wide, sky-and-Earth-cracking reverbs, and Astral's long, slithery tail gave single notes a symphonic-like sustain. I especially liked the lush Cosmos setting, with its regenerating fifth, which imparted a glimmering, celestial effect to sustained notes and chords. For expansive, heavenly reverbs, this is hands down one of my favorites. With any of these modes, the chorus modulation can add everything from subtle richness to cyclonic undulations.

I'll admit, I was initially at a loss to make good use of the Ascend and Descend modes, as the reverbs are pitched, respectively, about a semitone above and below that of your original signal. However, once I connected an expression pedal and assigned it to the mix control, I was able to bring the effect in and out at will, adding clouds of sonic menace that made sustained chords more interesting. Similarly, the pitch-bending effect available on the Stretch foot switch delivers a fun vintage video arcade–style effect that's perfect for punctuating solos or adding out-of-this-world sonic flourishes.

Overall, Astral Destiny is a welcome new flavor in EarthQuaker's lineup, and an inspiring effect for any guitarist looking for modulated octave reverbs combined with a wide range of sonic-stretching capabilities.

SPECIFICATIONS

Astral Destiny
CONTACT earthquakerdevices.com
PRICE $199 street

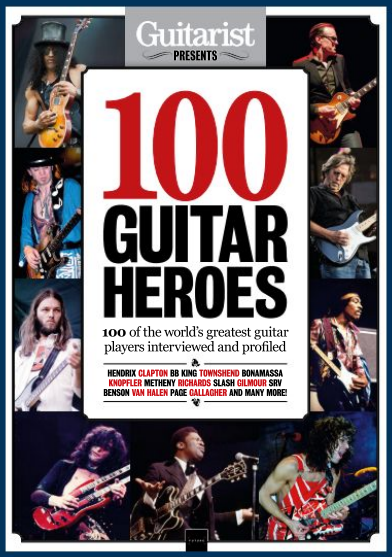
CONTROLS Preset, length, mode (Abyss, Shimmer, Sub, Sub Shimmer, Astral, Ascend, Descend, Cosmos), mod depth and rate, tone, mix. Stretch and Activate foot switches
I/O Input, output, expression input
DIMENSIONS 4.65" x 3.65" x 2.25"
POWER 9 volts DC (not included)
BUILT USA

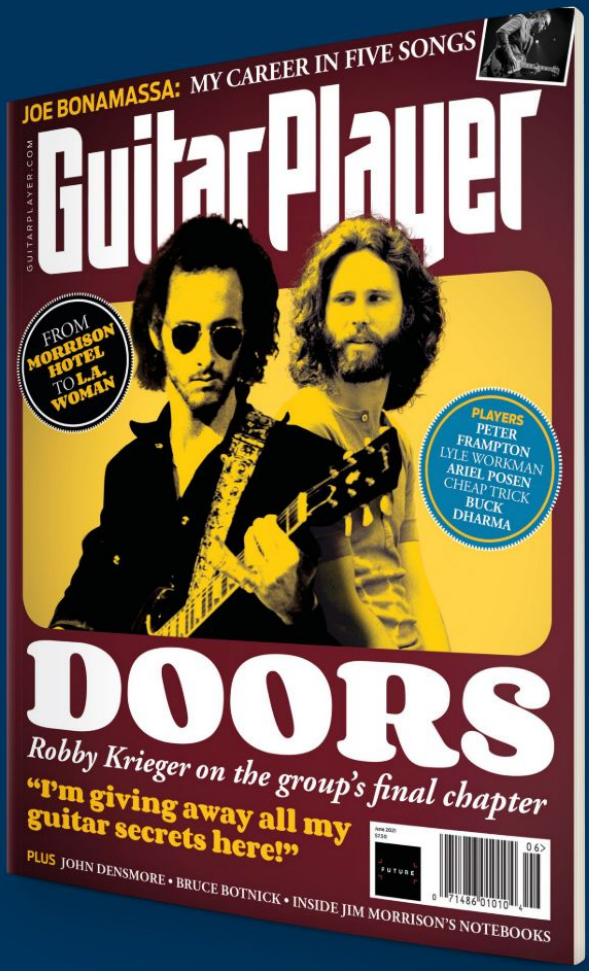
KUDOS Large and lush modulated octave reverbs. Fun and unusual effects. Expression pedal input with assignable control
CONCERNS None

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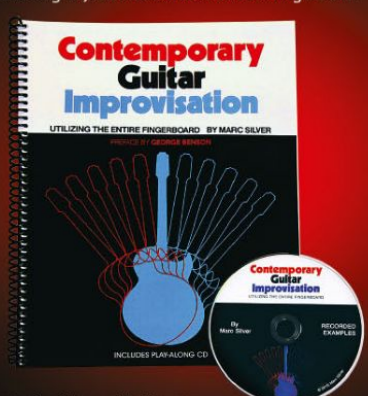
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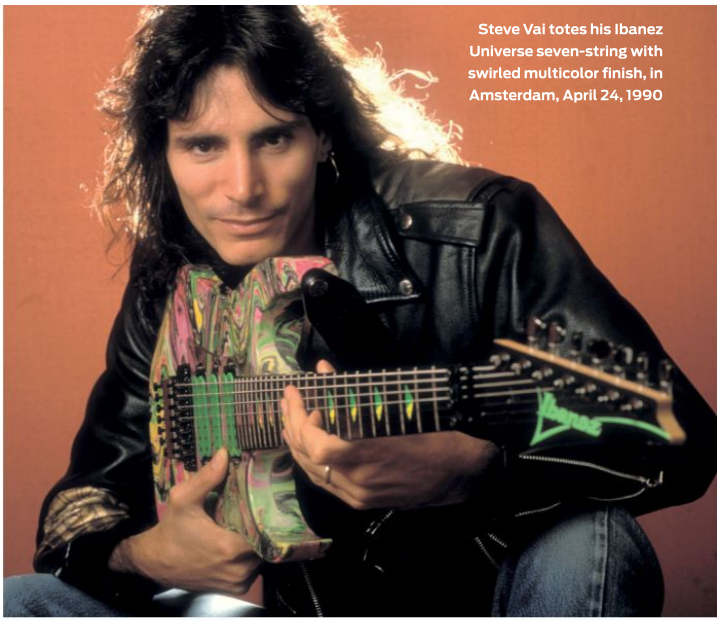
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Steve Vai totes his Ibanez Universe seven-string with swirled multicolor finish, in Amsterdam, April 24, 1990

How I Wrote...

"For the Love of God"

Steve Vai recalls how a mystery guitarist inspired him to write his signature song.

BY JOE BOSSO

ASK STEVE VAI'S fans to name their favorite of his songs, and most will tell you it's "For the Love of God," the hypnotically transplendent seventh track on his 1990 solo album, *Passion and Warfare*.

"It's an important one, for sure," Vai agrees. "It was one of the first real visceral, long-playing guitar songs I'd written. Other songs of mine are similar in the sense that they're melodic, but then they go off into the stratosphere — songs like 'Windows to the Soul,' 'Whispering a Prayer' and 'We Are One.' But for many reasons, 'For the Love of God' has a special place in my heart."

FOR THE LOVE OF LUKE

The song's origins go back to the late '70s, when Vai moved from New York to Los Angeles to begin working with Frank Zappa. Knowing Vai was a big Lenny Breau fan, a friend gave him a cassette of his music. He absorbed side one and anxiously flipped to side two. However, what he heard wasn't Breau at all — it was somebody else.

"The solos were unbelievable," Vai recalls. "They started off with a lot of space, very melodic, and then they grew into these towering peaks. They were unlike anything I'd heard before." For years, Vai didn't know the identity of the mystery guitarist until he ran into his friend again. "I asked him, 'Who is that on the flip side of that tape?' And he said, 'Some guy named Steve Lukather.'"

> **"I ASKED HIM, 'WHO IS THAT ON THE FLIP SIDE?' HE SAID, 'SOME GUY NAMED STEVE LUKATHER'"**

Vai not only became a huge Luke fan but was also inspired to write a song with the same kind of trajectory. "But it's not the kind of thing you can just command yourself to do," he says. "It has to be that moment when something taps you on the shoulder and says, 'Now.'" That moment came when he walked by an acoustic guitar. "I picked it up, played the chords, sang the melody and recorded it on a cassette. It was all right there."

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME

The cassette sat on Vai's shelf for years. "I would walk past it, and it would kind of trip me, but I just didn't know what to do with it," he says. It wasn't until he was recording the follow-up to his indie smash *Flex-Able* that he felt ready to give the song the treatment it deserved. Working in his own home studio, Vai guided bassist Stuart Hamm and drummer Tris Imboden through their parts, then recorded his guitar tracks in his own inimitable fashion.

While standing underneath a wooden pyramid he had built ("I was fascinated with pyramids at the time"), Vai, on the fourth day of a 10-day fast, performed the song's breathtaking solo on one of his signature Ibanez Universe seven-string guitars. "Because I was fasting, I alternated between feeling sick and experiencing this strange euphoria," he says. "Even in this state of mind, I wanted the solo to grow, and I gave it everything I had. It was pure, infinite freedom of expression. When I was done, I said, 'That's it. That's the best I can do.'"

FINDING A BELIEVER

Vai had just joined the band Whitesnake, but he was also signed to Capitol Records as a solo artist. When he played *Passion and Warfare* for his label reps, he was dismayed at their reaction. "They told me, 'We have no idea how to promote this,'" he says. Encouraged by Whitesnake singer David Coverdale (who had recorded a spoken-word coda on "For the Love of God"), Vai played the album for Relativity Records' A&R head Cliff Cultreri. "Cliff got the record right away. Relativity released *Passion and Warfare*, and it struck a nerve. It was fantastic."

Vai can't recall a live show in which he hasn't included "For the Love of God" in the set. "It's such a privilege every time I play it," he says. "I never get tired of it. I always look to go deeper and deeper into every note." With a laugh, he recalls the first time he performed it onstage, in 1991, in Spain. "What an experience that was! I wish I could say the heavens opened up and white doves flew down, but the truth is, I was so invested in playing it right from start to finish that I couldn't be in the moment. The whole time, I was thinking, 'Don't fuck this up, Vai!'"

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